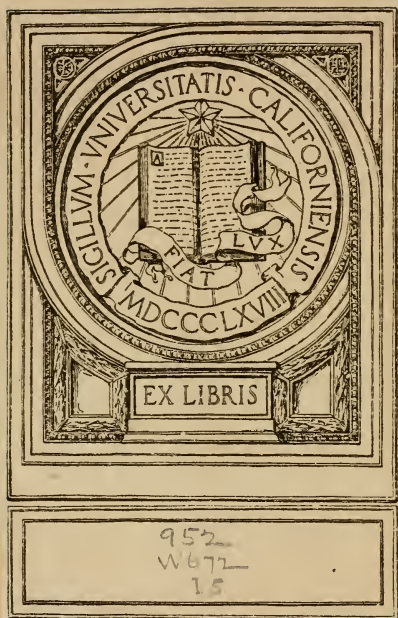




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OSCAR WILDE

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PART I

OSCAR WILDE: THE MAN

OSCAR WILDE

THE MAN

THE *συνετοί*, the connoisseurs, always recognised the genius of Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde from the very first moment when he began to write. For many years ordinary people to whom literature and literary affairs were not of, at anyrate, absorbing interest only knew of Oscar Wilde by his extravagances and poses.

Then it happened that Wilde turned his powers in the direction of the stage and achieved a swift and brilliant success. The English public then began to realise that here was an unusually brilliant man, and the extraordinary genius of the subject of this work would have certainly been universally recognised in a few more years, when the shocking scandals associated with his name occurred and Oscar Wilde disappeared into oblivion.

A great change gradually took place in public opinion. Little by little the feeling of prejudice against the work of Oscar Wilde began to die away. The man himself was dead. He had expiated his crimes by a prolonged agony of

the most hideous suffering and disgrace, and people began to wonder if his writings were in any way associated with the dark side of his life and character, or whether they might not, after all, be beautiful, pure, and treasures of the literature of our time. The four comedies of Manners, "Lady Windermere's Fan," "The Ideal Husband," "A Woman Of No Importance," "The Importance Of Being Earnest," everyone had seen and laughed at. They were certainly absolutely without offence. It was gradually seen that because a house was built by an architect of an immoral private life that did not necessarily invalidate it as a residence, that if Stephenson had ended his life upon the gallows people would still find railways convenient and necessary. The truth gradually dawned that Wilde had never in his life written a line that was immoral or impure, and that, in short, the criminal side of him was only a part of his complex nature, horribly disastrous for himself and his personal life, but absolutely without influence upon his work.

Art and his aberration never mingled or overlapped. Everybody began to realise the fact.

Opinion was also being quietly moulded from within by a band of literary and artistic people, some of them friends of the late author, others knowing him simply through his work.

The public began to ask for Wilde's books

and found it almost impossible to obtain them, for the "Ballad of Reading Gaol," published while its author was still alive, had not stimulated any general demand for other works.

It was after Oscar Wilde's death that his friends and admirers were able to set to work at their endeavours to rehabilitate him as artist in the mind of general prejudice. Books and monographs were written about Wilde in English, French, and German. He was quoted in the leading Continental reviews. His play "Salomé" met with sudden and stupendous success all over Europe, a famous musician turned it into an opera. A well-known English man of letters, Mr Robert Harborough Sherard, published a final official "Life" of the dead author, and Wilde's own "De Profundis" appeared to startle, sadden, and thrill the whole reading world.

His plays are being revived, and an authoritative and exhaustive edition of his writings is being issued by a leading publishing house.

There is no doubt about it, the most prejudiced and hostile critics must admit it—in a literary sense, as a man of letters with extraordinary genius, Oscar Wilde has come into his own. The time is, therefore, ripe for a work of the present character which endeavours to "appreciate" one of the strangest, saddest, most artistic and powerful brains of modern times.

Five years ago such a book as this would probably have been out of place. When Balzac died Sainte-Beuve prefaced a short critical article of fourteen pages, as follows:—

“A careful study of the famous novelist who has just been taken from us, and whose sudden loss has excited universal interest, would require a whole work, and the time for that, I think, has not yet come. Those sort of moral autopsies cannot be made over a freshly dug grave, especially when he who has been laid in it was full of strength and fertility, and seemed still full of future works and days. All that is possible and fitting in respect of a great contemporary renown at the moment death lays it low is to point out, by means of a few clear-cut lines, the merits, the varied skill, by which it charmed its epoch and acquired influence over it.”

When Oscar Wilde died, and before the publication of “*De Profundis*,” various short essays did, as I have stated, make an appearance. A longer work seems called for, and it is that want which the present volume does its best to supply.

“Oscar Wilde: The Man” is the title of the first part of this Appreciation. In Mr Sherard’s “The Story of an Unhappy Friendship,” as also in his careful and scholarly “Life,” the many-sided nature of Oscar Wilde was set forth with all the ability of a brilliant pen. But there is

yet room for another, and possibly more detached point of view, and also a summary of the views of others which will assist the general reader to gain a mental picture of a writer whose works, in a very short time, are certain to have a general, as well as a particular appeal.

The scheme of a work of this nature, which is critical rather than biographical, would nevertheless be incomplete without a personal study.

The study of Wilde's writings cannot fail to be enormously assisted by some knowledge of the man himself, and how he was regarded by others both before and after his personal disgrace.

Ever since his name was known to the world at all the public view of him has constantly been shifting and changing. There are, however, four principal periods during each of which Wilde was regarded in a totally different way. I have made a careful analysis of each of these periods and collected documentary and other evidence which defines and explains them.

The first period of all—Oscar Wilde himself always spoke of the different phases of his extraordinary career as “periods—was that of the “Æsthetic movement” as it is generally called, or the æsthetic “craze” as many people prefer to name it still. New movements, whether good or bad in their conception and ultimate result, always excite enmity, hostility, and ridicule. In

affairs, in religion, in art, this is an invariable rule. No pioneer has ever escaped it. England laughed at the first railway, jeered at the volunteer movement and laughed at John Keats in precisely the same fashion as it ridiculed Oscar Wilde and the æsthetic movement.

It is as well to define that movement carefully, for, though marred by innumerable extravagances and still suffering from the inanities of its first disciples, it has nevertheless had a real and permanent influence upon English life. Oscar Wilde was, of course, not the originator of the æsthetic movement. He took upon himself to become its hierophant, and to infuse much that was peculiarly his own into it. The movement was begun by Ruskin, Rossetti, William Morris, Burne-Jones, and a host of others, while it was continued in the delicate and beautiful writings of Walter Pater. But it had always been an eclectic movement, not for the public eye or ear, neither known of nor popular with ordinary people.

Oscar Wilde then began to interest and excite England and America in the true aims and methods of art of all kinds. It shows an absolute ignorance of the late Victorian era to say that the movement was a passing craze. To Oscar Wilde we owe it that people of refined tastes but moderate means can obtain beautiful papers for the walls of their houses at a moderate

cost. The cheap and lovely fabrics that we can buy in Regent Street are spun as a direct consequence of the movement; harmony and delicacy of colour, beauty of curve and line, the whole renaissance of art in our household furniture are mainly due to the writings and lectures of Oscar Wilde.

It is not a crime to love beautiful things, it is not effeminate to care for them. It is to the subject of this appreciation we owe our national change of feeling on such matters.

This, briefly, is what the æsthetic movement was, such are its indubitable results. Let us see, in some instances, how Wilde was regarded in the period when, before his real literary successes, he preached the gospel of Beauty in everyday life.

Let us take a Continental view of Wilde in his first period, the view of a really eminent man, a distinguished scientist and man of letters.

The name of Dr Max Nordau will be familiar to many readers of this book. But, if the book fulfils the purpose for which it was designed, then possibly there will be many readers who will know little or nothing of the distinguished foreign writer. Hard, one-sided, and bitter as his remarks upon Wilde during the æsthetic movement will seem to most of us—seem to me—yet they have the merit of absolute detachment and sincerity. It is as well to insist on this fact

in order that my readers may realise exactly such value as the words may have, no less and no more. The following short account of Dr Max Nordau's position and achievements is taken from that useful dictionary of celebrities, "Who's Who?" for 1907 :—

"NORDAU, MAX SIMON, M.D. Paris, Budapesth ; Officier d'Académie, France ; Commander of the Royal Hellenic Order of the St Saviour ; author and physician ; President Congress of Zionists ; Hon. Mem. of the Greek Acad. of the Parnassos ; *b.* Budapesth, 29th July 1849 ; *y. s.* of Gabriel Südfeld, Rabbi, Krotoschin, Prussia, and his 2nd wife, *b.* Nelkin, Riga, Russia. *Educ.* Royal Gymnasium and Protestant Gymnasium, Budapesth ; Royal University, Budapesth ; Faculty of Medicine, Paris. Wrote very early for newspapers ; travelled for several years all over Europe ; practised as a physician for a year and a half, 1878-80, at Budapesth ; settled then at Paris, residing there ever since ; *m.* Anna-Elizabeth, 2nd *d.* of State-councillor Captain Julius Dons, Copenhagen, Denmark ; one *d.* *Publications* : Paris, *Studien und Bilder aus dem wahren Milliardenlande*, 1878 ; *Seifenblasen*, 1879 ; *Vom Kreml zur Alhambra*, 1880 ; *Aus der Zeitungswelt* (together with Ferdinand Gross), 1880 ; *Paris under der dritten Republik*, 1881 ; *der Krieg der Millionen*, 1882 ; *Die conventionellen Lügen der Culturmenschheit*, 1883 ;

Ausgewählte Pariser Briefe, 1884; Paradoxe, 1885; Die Krankheit des Jahrhunderts, 1887; Seelenanalysen, 1891; Gefühlskomödie, 1892; Entartung, 1893; Das Recht zu lieben, 1894; Die Kugel, 1895; Drohnenschlacht, 1896; La funzione sociale dell arte, 1897; Doctor Kohn, 1898; The Drones must Die, 1899; Zeitgenöissische Franzosen, 1901; Morganatic, 1904; Mahâ - Rôg, 1905. *Recreations*: foil-fencing, swimming. *Address*: 8, Rue Léonie, Paris."

Nearly all the modern manifestations of Art, implies Dr Max Nordau, in "Degeneration," are manifestations of madness. Such a sweeping statement is incredible and has not—nor will it have—many advocates, despite the brilliant special pleading of its originator. In Oscar Wilde's case the aphorism seems particularly misleading for the reason that there may *appear* to be a considerable amount of truth in it.

That Wilde's *social* downfall was due to a certain kind of elliptiform insanity is without doubt. Mr Sherard has insisted on this over and over again. He has spent enormous labour in researches into Wilde's ancestry. His view is really a scientific view because it is written by an artist who sees both sides of the question, has a judicial mind, and while capable of appreciating the truths that science teaches us, is further capable of welding them to the psychological truths which the intuition of the artist alone evolves.

insane A certain definite and partial insanity alone can explain Wilde's life in certain of its aspects. But when once his pen was in his hand, in his real bright life of literature and art, this hidden thing entirely disappears. Therefore, Dr Max Nordau's study seems to me fundamentally wrong, though extremely interesting and not to be disregarded. To know Oscar Wilde we must know what all sorts of people, whose opinion has weight enough to secure a wide hearing, really thought about him.

The German scientist said :

“ The ego-mania of decadentism, its love of the artificial, its aversion to nature, and to all forms of activity and movement, its megalomaniacal contempt for men and its exaggeration of the importance of art, have found their English representative among the ‘Æsthetes,’ the chief of whom is Oscar Wilde.

“ Wilde has done more by his personal eccentricities than by his works. Like Barbey d'Aurevilly, whose rose-coloured silk hats and gold lace cravats are well known, and like his disciple Joséphin Péladan, who walks about in lace frills and satin doublet, Wilde dresses in queer costumes which recall partly the fashions of the Middle Ages, partly the rococo modes. He pretends to have abandoned the dress of the present time because it offends his sense of the beautiful ; but this is only a pretext in which

probably he himself does not believe. What really determines his actions is the hysterical craving to be noticed, to occupy the attention of the world with himself, to get talked about. It is asserted that he has walked down Pall Mall in the afternoon dressed in doublet and breeches, with a picturesque biretta on his head, and a sunflower in his hand, the quasi-heraldic symbol of the *Æsthetes*. This anecdote has been reproduced in all the biographies of Wilde, and I have nowhere seen it denied. But it is a promenade with a sunflower in the hand also inspired by a craving for the beautiful.

“Phrasemakers are perpetually repeating the twaddle, that it is a proof of honourable independence to follow one’s own taste without being bound down to the regulation costume of the Philistine cattle, and to choose for clothes the colours, materials and cut which appear beautiful to oneself, no matter how much they may differ from the fashion of the day. The answer to this cackle should be that it is above all a sign of anti-social ego-mania to irritate the majority unnecessarily, only to gratify vanity, or an æsthetical instinct of small importance and easy to control—such as is always done when, either by word or deed, a man places himself in opposition to this majority. He is obliged to repress many manifestations of opinions and desires out of regard for his fellow-creatures; to make him

understand this is the aim of education, and he who has not learnt to impose some restraint upon himself in order not to shock others is called by malicious Philistines, not an Æsthete, but a blackguard.

“It may become a duty to combat the vulgar herd in the cause of truth and knowledge; but to a serious man this duty will always be felt as a painful one. He will never fulfil it with a light heart, and he will examine strictly and cautiously if it be really a high and imperative law which forces him to be disagreeable to the majority of his fellow-creatures. Such an action is, in the eyes of a moral and sane man, a kind of martyrdom for a conviction, to carry out which constitutes a vital necessity; it is a form, and not an easy form, of self-sacrifice, for it means the renunciation of the joy which the consciousness of sympathy with one’s fellow-creatures gives, and it exacts the painful overthrow of social instincts, which, in truth, do not exist in deranged ego-maniacs, but are very strong in the normal man.

“The predilection for strange costume is a pathological aberration of a racial instinct. The adornment of the exterior has its origin in the strong desire to be admired by others—primarily by the opposite sex—to be recognised by them as especially well shaped, handsome, youthful, or rich and powerful, or as pre-eminent through

rank or merit. It is practised, then, with the object of producing a favourable impression on others, and is a result of thought about others, of preoccupation with the race. If, now, this adornment be, not through misjudgment but purposely, of a character to cause irritation to others, or lend itself to ridicule—in other words, if it excites disapproval instead of approbation—it then runs exactly counter to the object of the art of dress, and evinces a perversion of the instinct of vanity.

“The pretence of a sense of beauty is the excuse of consciousness for a crank of the conscious. The fool who masquerades in Pall Mall does not see himself, and, therefore, does not enjoy the beautiful appearance which is supposed to be an æsthetic necessity for him. There would be some sense in his conduct if it had for its object an endeavour to cause others to dress in accordance with his taste; for them he sees and they can scandalise him by the ugliness, and charm by the beauty, of their costume. But to take the initiative in a new artistic style in dress brings the innovator not one hair's breadth nearer his assumed goal of æsthetic satisfaction.

“When, therefore, an Oscar Wilde goes about in ‘æsthetic costume’ among gazing Philistines, exciting either their ridicule or their wrath, it is no indication of independence of character, but rather from a purely anti-socialistic, ego-maniacal

recklessness and hysterical longing to make a sensation, justified by no exalted aim; nor is it from a strong desire of beauty, but from a malevolent mania for contradiction."

It is impossible to read the extracts quoted above—and only a few paragraphs sufficient to show the trend of a much longer article have been used—without realising its injustice and yet at the same time its perfect sincerity. During the "first period," with which we are dealing now, Wilde undoubtedly excited the enmity and ridicule of a vast number of people. He knew that he had something to say which was worth listening to. He knew also—as the genius always has known—that he was superior in intellect to those by whom he was surrounded. His temperament was impatient. He wanted to take the place to which he felt he was entitled in a sudden moment. His quick Celtic imagination ran riot with fact, his immeasurable ambition, his serene consciousness of worth, which to usual minds and temperaments suggested nothing but conceit, all urged him to display and extravagance in order to more speedily mount the rostrum from which he would be heard.

Therefore, in this first period of this so astonishing a career, he went far to spoil and obscure his message by the very means he hoped would enable him to publish it widely. He invented a pose which he intended should become

a megaphone, whereas, in the effect, it did but retard the hearing of his voice until the practical wisdom of what he wished to say proved itself in concrete form.

Nor must we ever forget the man's constant sense of humour, a mocking sprite which doubtless led him to this or that public foolishness while he chuckled within at his own attitude and the dance he was leading his imitators and fools. For Oscar Wilde had a supreme sense of humour. Many people would like to deny him *humour*, while admitting his marvellous and scintillating *wit*. That they are wrong I unhesitatingly assert, and I believe that this will be proved over and over again in the following pages.

Let us take another view of Wilde at this period. It was written after his disappearance from public life, or rather when it was imminent and certain. The words are those of Mr Labouchere, the *flaneur* with an intellect, the somewhat acid critic of how many changing aspects and phases of English social life.

"I have known Oscar Wilde off and on for years," writes Mr Labouchere in *Truth*. "Clever and witty he unquestionably is, but I have always regarded him as somewhat wrong in the head, for his craving after notoriety seemed to me a positive craze. There was nothing that he would not do to attract attention. When he

went over to New York he went about dressed in a bottle-green coat with a waist up to his shoulders. When he entered a restaurant people threw things at him. When he drove in the evening to deliver his lectures the windows of his carriage were broken, until a policeman rode on each side of it. Far from objecting to all this, it filled him with delighted complacency. 'Insult me, throw mud at me, but only look at me,' seemed to be his creed; and such a creed was never acted upon by anyone whose mind was not out of balance. So strange and wondrous is his mind, when in an abnormal condition, that it would not surprise me if he were deriving a keen enjoyment from a position which most people, whether really innocent or guilty, would prefer to die rather than occupy. He must have known in what a glass house he lived when he challenged investigation in a court of justice. After he had done this he went abroad. Why did he not stay abroad? The possibilities of a prison may not be pleasing to him, but I believe that the notoriety that has overtaken him has such a charm for him that it outweighs everything else. I remember, in the early days of the cult of æstheticism, hearing someone ask him how a man of his undoubted capacity could make such a fool of himself. He gave this explanation. He had written, he said, a book of poems, and he believed in their excellence. In

vain he went from publisher to publisher asking them to bring them out : no one would even read them, for he was unknown. In order to find a publisher he felt that he must do something to become a personality. So he hit upon æstheticism. It succeeded. People talked about him ; they invited him to their houses as a sort of lion. He then took his poems to a publisher, who — still without reading them — gladly accepted them.”

This is thoroughly unsympathetic, but no doubt it represents a mood with some faithfulness. In criticising the work of critics one *must be a psychologist*. Religion, the Christian religion at anyrate, teaches tolerance. Its teachings are seldom obeyed. The four Hags of the litany—let us personify them !—Envy, Hatred, Malice, and Uncharitableness unfortunately intrude into religious life too often and too powerfully. But the real psychologist, not the scientist (*vide* Nordau) *is* able to understand better than anyone else the motives which have animated criticism at any given date. The psychologist more than any other type of man or woman has learnt the lesson Charles Reade tried to inculcate in “Put Yourself In His Place.”

With a little effort we can realise what *Truth* thought when these lines were written. We cannot blame the writer, we can only record

his words as a part of the general statement dealing with Oscar Wilde's life and attitude during the "Æsthetic Period."

At this point the reader may possibly ask himself if the title given to the book—"Oscar Wilde: an Appreciation"—is entirely justified. "The writer of it," he may say to himself, "is giving us examples of hostile criticism of Wilde's first period, and though he endeavours to explain them, yet, in an appreciation, it rather seems that such quotations are out of place."

I do not think that if the point of view is considered for a moment, the stricture will be persisted in.

Eulogy, indiscriminating eulogy, is simply an *ex parte* statement which can have no weight at all. I shall endeavour to show, before this first part of the book is completed, not only how those who attacked Wilde were mistaken, not only how those who bestowed indiscriminate praise upon him made an over-statement, but finally and definitely what Wilde was as seen through the temperament of the writer, corrected by the statements of other writers both for and against him.

I am convinced that this is the only scientific method of arriving at a just estimation of the character of this brilliant and extraordinary man. No summing up of the æsthetic period could be complete without copious references to the great

chronicler of our modern life—the pages of Mr Punch.

Punch has never been bitter. It has often been severe, but Mr Punch has always, from the very first moment of his arrival among us, successfully held the balance between this or that faction, and, moreover, has faithfully reflected the consensus of public opinion upon any given matter.

The extraordinary skill with which some of the brightest and merriest wits have made our national comic paper the true diary of events cannot be controverted or disputed. Follies and fashions have been criticised with satire, but never with spleen. Addison said that the “appearance of a man of genius in the world may always be known by the virulence of dunces.” *Punch* has proved for generations that its kindly appreciation or depreciation has never been virulent, but nearly always an accurate statement of the opinion and point of view of the ordinary more or less cultured and well-bred person.

It has always been a sign of eminence in this or that department of life to be mentioned in *Punch* at all. The conductors of that journal during its whole career have always exercised the wisest discrimination, and have always kept shrewd fingers upon the pulses of English thought. When a politician, for example, is

caricatured in *Punch* that politician knows that he has arrived at a certain place and point in public estimation. When a writer is caricatured, either in line or words, he also knows that he has, at anyrate, obtained a hold of this or that sort upon the country.

Now those who would try to minimise the place of Oscar Wilde in the public eye during the æsthetic period have only to look at the pages of *Punch* to realise how greatly that movement influenced English life during its continuance.

Let it be thoroughly understood—and very few people will attempt to deny it—that *Punch* has always been a perfectly adjusted barometer of celebrity.

It is, therefore, not out of place, herein, to publish a bibliography of the references to Oscar Wilde which, from first to last of that comet-like career, appeared in the pages of Mr Punch. Such a list proves immediately the one-sidedness of Dr Max Nordau's and Mr Labouchere's views. From extracts I have given from the remarks of these two eminent people the ordinary man might well be inclined to think that the æsthetic movement and the doings of Oscar Wilde in his first period were small and local things. This is not so, and the following carefully compiled list will show that it is not so.

The list has been properly indexed and is now

given below. Afterwards I shall give a small selection from the witticisms of the famous journal to support the bibliography.

Those students of the work of Oscar Wilde and his position in modern life will find the references below of great interest. They date from 1881 to 1906, and those collectors of "Oscariana" and students of Wilde's work will doubtless be able to obtain the numbers in which the following articles, poems, and paragraphs have appeared.

1881

February	12, p.	62.	Maudle on the Choice of a Profession.
"	" p.	71.	Beauty <i>Not</i> at Home.
April	9, p.	161.	A Maudle in Ballad. <i>To His Lily.</i>
"	30, p.	201.	The First of May. An Æsthetic Rondeau. Substitution.
May	7, p.	213.	A Padded Cell.
"	" p.	215.	Design for an Æsthetic Theatrical Poster. "Let Us Live Up To It."
"	14, p.	218.	The Grosvenor Gallery.
"	" p.	220.	Fashionable Nursery Rhyme.
"	" p.	221.	Philistia Defiant.
"	28, p.	242.	More Impressions. <i>By Oscuro Wildegoose.</i> La Fuite des Oies.
"	" p.	245.	Æsthetic Notes.
June	25, p.	297.	Æsthetics at Ascot.
"	" p.	298.	<i>Punch's</i> Fancy Portraits. No. 37, "O. W."
July	23, p.	26.	Swinburne and Water.
"	" p.	29.	Maunderings at Marlow. (<i>By Our Own Æsthetic Bard.</i>)
August	20, p.	84.	"Croquis" by Dumb-Crambo Junior.

1881—continued

August	20, p.	84.	Too-Too Awful. <i>A Sonnet of Sorrow.</i>
September	17, p.	132.	Impression De L'Automne. (<i>Stanzas by our muchly-admired Poet, Dravit Milde.</i>)
October	1, p.	154.	The Æsthete to the Rose. (<i>By Wildegoose, after Waller.</i>)
	29, p.	204.	Spectrum Analysis. (<i>After "The Burden of Itys," by the Wild-Eyed Poet.</i>)
November	12, p.	228.	A Sort of "Sortes."
	19, p.	237.	Poet's Corner; Or, <i>Nonsense Rhymes on Well-known Names.</i>
	26, p.	241.	The Downfall of the Dado.
	" p.	242.	Theoretikos. By Oscuro Wildegoose.
December	10, p.	274.	"Impressions du Theatre."
	17, p.	288.	The Two Æsthetic Poets.
	24, p.	289.	Mr Punch's "Mother Hubbard" Fairy Tale Grinaway Christmas Cards.—(Second Series.)
	31, p.	309.	Mrs Langtry as "Lady Macbeth."
Almanack for 1882	(Dec. 6, 1881)	(p. 5).	More Impressions. (<i>By Oscuro Wildegoose.</i>) Des Sornettes.

1882

January	7, p.	10.	"A New Departure."
	" pp.	10, 11.	Clowning and Classicism.
	" p.	12.	In Earnest.
	14, p.	14.	Oscar Interviewed.
	" p.	16.	Æsthetic Ladies' Hair.
	" p.	18.	Murder Made Easy. <i>A Ballad à la Mode.</i> By "Brother Jonathan" Wilde. (With Cartoon.)
	" p.	18.	To An Æsthetic Poet.
	" p.	22.	Impression du Theatre.
February	4, p.	49.	Sketches from "Boz." Oscar Wilde as <i>Harold Skimpole</i> .

1882—continued

February	4, p.	58.	A Poet's Day. Ariadne in Naxes; Or, Very Like a Wail.
"	" p.	49.	Distinctly Precious Pantomime.
"	18, p.	81.	Lines by Mrs Cimabue Brown.
March	11, p.	109.	The Poet Wilde's <i>Unkissed Kisses</i> .
"	" p.	117.	Ossian (with Variations).
April	1, p.	153.	A Philistine to An Æsthete.
"	" p.	156.	The Poet Wilde.
"	8, p.	168.	Impression De Gaiety Théâtre. <i>By Ossian Wilderness.</i>
"	22, p.	192.	Likely.
November	4, p.	216.	Not Generally Known.
"	25, p.	249.	"What! No Soap!" Or, Pop Goes The Langtry Bubble.

1883

March	31, p.	155.	To Be Sold.
"	" p.	156.	Sage Green. (<i>By a Fading-out Æsthete.</i>)
May	12, pp.	220-1.	Our Academy Guide. No. 163.— Private Frith's View.—Members of the Salvation Army, led by General Oscar Wilde, joining in a hymn.
September	1, p.	99.	"The Play's (not) the Thing."
November	3, p.	209.	Sartorial Sweetness and Light.
"	10, p.	218.	Counter Criticism.
"	17, p.	231.	Cheap Telegrams.
"	" p.	238.	Another Invitation to Amerikay.
"	24, p.	249.	"And is this Fame?"

1884

June	14, p.	288.	The Town. II.—Bond Street.
August	23, p.	96.	The Town. No. XI.—"Form." A Legend of Modern London. Part I.
"	30, p.	105.	A Legend of Modern London. Part II.

1885

- May 30, p. 253. Ben Trovato.
 June 27, p. 310. Interiors and Exteriors. No. 13.
 At Burlington House. The
 "Swarry."
 December 7, Almanack for 1886. The Walnut Season.
 "Here Y' ar'. Ten a Penny.
 All Cracked."

1887

- December 10, p. 276. Our Booking - Office. *Woman's
 World.*

1889

- January 5, p. 12. Our Booking-Office. Article in
The Fortnightly.
 July 6, p. 12. Advertisement of *Blackwood's
 Magazine*, containing "The
 Portrait of Mr W. H." by Oscar
 Wilde.
 October 5, p. 160. Appropriate Subject.

1890

- July 19, p. 26. Our Booking-Office. *Dorian Gray.*
 September 20, p. 135. Development.
 Christmas Number. Punch Among the Planets.

1891

- March 14, p. 123. Desdemona to the Author of
 "Dorian Gray." (*Apropos of
 his paragraphic Preface.*)
 „ „ p. 125. Wilde Flowers.
 May 30, p. 257. Our Booking-Office. *Intentions.*

1892

- March 5, p. 113. A Wilde "Tag" to a Tame Play.
 With Fancy Portrait. "Quite
 Too-Too Puffickly Precious."

1892—continued

March	12, p.	123.	Lord Wildermere's Mother-in-Law.
„	„ p.	124.	Pathetic Description of the Present State of Mr George Alexander.
April	30, p.	215.	Staircase Scenes.—No. 1, Private View, Royal Academy.
June	25, p.	304.	The Playful Sally.
July	2, p.	315.	A Difficulty.
„	9, p.	1.	A Wilde Idea; Or, More Injustice to Ireland.
„	16, p.	16.	On the Fly-leaf of an Old Book.
„	16, p.	23.	Racine, With the Chill Off.

1893

January	19, p.	29.	“To Rome for Sixteen Guineas.”
April	22, p.	189.	The B. and S. Drama at the Adelphi.
„	29, p.	193.	Stray Thoughts on Play-Writing.
„	„ p.	195.	The Premier at the Haymarket last Wednesday.
May	6, p.	213.	A Work—of Some Importance.
„	13, p.	221.	Wilder Ideas; Or, <i>Conversation as she is spoken at the Haymarket.</i>
„	27, p.	246.	A Wylde Vade Mecum. (<i>By Professor H-xl-y.</i>)
June	3, p.	257.	Second Title for the Play at the Haymarket.
July	15, p.	13.	An Afternoon Party.
„	15, p.	22.	“The Play is Not the Thing.”
„	29, p.	46.	At the T.R.H.
August	26, p.	94.	Still Wilder Ideas. (<i>Possibilities for the next O. Wilde Play.</i>)
December	30, pp.	304-5.	New Year's Eve at Latterday Hall. An Incident. Dorian Gray taking Juliet in to Dinner.

1894

February	17, p.	73.	"Blushing Honours."
March	10, p.	109.	She-Notes. By Borgia Smudgiton.
July	21, p.	33.	The Minx.—A Poem in Prose.
August	4, p.	60.	Our Charity Fete.
October	13, p.	177.	The O.B.C. (Limited).
"	20, p.	185.	The Blue Gardenia. (<i>A Colourable Imitation.</i>)
"	27, p.	204.	Morbidezza.
November	10, p.	225.	The Decadent Guys. (<i>A Colour-Study in Green Carnations.</i>)
December	15, p.	287.	The Truisms of Life. (Note 12.)

1895

January	12, p.	24.	Overheard Fragment of a Dialogue.
"	19, p.	29.	"To Rome for Sixteen Guineas."
"	p.	36.	"A penny Plain—But Oscar Coloured."
February	2, p.	54.	A Wilde "Ideal Husband."
"	" p.	60.	A God in the Os-Car.
"	23, p.	85.	The O. W. Vade Mecum.
March	2, p.	106.	"The Rivals" at the A.D.C.
"	" p.	107.	The Advisability of Not Being Born in a Handbag.
"	16, p.	121.	The Advantage of Being Consistent.
April	6, p.	157.	April Foolosophy. (<i>By One of Them.</i>)
"	13, p.	171.	The Long and Short of It.
"	" p.	177.	Concerning a Misused Term; viz. <i>Art</i> , as recently applied to a certain form of Literature.

1906

January	3, p.	18.	Our Booking-Office. (R. H. Sherard's " <i>Twenty Years in Paris.</i> ")
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This list at least spells, and spelt, celebrity and a recognition of the importance of the Æsthetic movement.

Especially did the American lecturing tour of Oscar Wilde excite the comment and ridicule of *Punch*.

I quote some paragraphs from a pretended despatch from an "American correspondent."

A POET'S DAY

(*From an American Correspondent*)

OSCAR AT BREAKFAST! OSCAR AT LUNCHEON!!
OSCAR AT DINNER!!! OSCAR AT SUPPER!!!!

"You see I am, after all, but mortal," remarked the Poet, with an ineffable affable smile, as he looked up from an elegant but substantial dish of ham and eggs. Passing a long, willowy hand through his waving hair, he swept away a stray curl-paper with the *nonchalance* of a D'ORSAY.

After this effort, Mr WILDE expressed himself as feeling somewhat faint; and, with a half-apologetic smile, ordered another portion of

HAM AND EGGS

in the evident enjoyment of which, after a brief interchange of international courtesies, I left the Poet.

The irresponsible but not ungenial and quite

legitimate fun of this is a fairly representative indication of the way in which the young "Apostle of Beauty" was thought of in England during his American visit.

The writer goes on to tell how, later in the day, he once more encountered the "young patron of Culture." It is astonishing to us now to realise how even the word "culture" was distorted from its real meaning and made into the badge of a certain set. At anyrate, Mr Punch's contributor goes on to say that "Oscar" was found at the business premises of the

CO-OPERATIVE DRESS ASSOCIATION.

On this occasion the Poet, by special request, appeared in the uniform of an English Officer of the Dragoon Guards, the dress, I understand, being supplied for the occasion from the elegant wardrobe of Mr D'OYLEY CARTE's "Patience" Company.

Several ladies expressed their disappointment at the "insufficient leanness" of the Poet's figure, whereupon his Business Manager explained that he belonged to the fleshy school.

To accommodate Mr WILDE, the ordinary lay-figures were removed from the showroom, and, after a sumptuous luncheon, to which the *élite* of Miss ——'s customers were invited, the distinguished guest posed with his fair hostess in an allegorical tableau, representing *English Poetry*

extending the right hand to American Commerce.

"This is indeed Fair Trade," remarked Mr Wilde lightly, and immediately improvised a testimonial advertisement (in verse) in praise of Miss ——'s patent dress-improver.

At a dinner given by "JEMMY" CROWDER (as we familiarly call him), the Apologist of Art had discarded his military garb for the ordinary dress of an

ENGLISH GENTLEMAN

in which his now world-famed knee-breeches form a conspicuous item, suggesting indeed the Admiral's uniform in Mr D'OYLEY CARTE'S "Pinafore" combination.

"I think," said the Poet, in a pause between courses, "one cannot dine too well"—placing everyone at his ease by his admirable tact in partaking of the thirty-six items of the *menu*.

The skit continues wittily enough, but it is not necessary to quote more of it. The paragraphs sufficiently explain the attitude of Mr Punch, which was the general attitude at the time.

It was hammered in persistently. "Oscar Interviewed" appeared under the date of January 1882, and again, in the following extracts the reader will recognise the same note.

“DETERMINED to anticipate the rabble of penny-a-liners ready to pounce upon any distinguished foreigner who approaches our shores, and eager to assist a sensitive Poet in avoiding the impertinent curiosity and ill-bred insolence of the Professional Reporter, I took the fastest pilot-boat on the station, and boarded the splendid Cunard steamer, the *Boshnia*, in the shucking of a peanut.”

HIS ÆSTHETIC APPEARANCE

He stood, with his large hand passed through his long hair, against a high chimney-piece—which had been painted pea-green, with panels of peacock-blue pottery let in at uneven intervals—one elbow on the high ledge, the other hand on his hip. He was dressed in a long, snuff-coloured, single-breasted coat, which reached to his heels, and was relieved with a sealskin collar and cuffs rather the worse for wear. Frayed linen, and an orange silk handkerchief, gave a note to the generally artistic colouring of the *ensemble*, while one small daisy drooped despondently in his buttonhole. . . . We may state that the chimney-piece, as well as the sealskin collar, is the property of OSCAR, and will appear in his Lectures “on the Growth of Artistic Taste in England.”

HE SPEAKS FOR HIMSELF

“Yes ; I should have been astonished had I not

been interviewed ! Indeed, I have not been well on board this Cunard *Argosy*. I have wrestled with the glaukous-haired Poseidon, and feared his ravishment. Quite : I have been too ill, too utterly ill. Exactly—seasick in fact, if I must descend to so trivial an expression. I fear the clean beauty of my strong limbs is somewhat waned. I am scarcely myself—my nerves are thrilling like throbbing violins—in exquisite pulsation.

“ You are right. I believe I was the first to devote my subtle brain-chords to the worship of the Sunflower, and the apotheosis of the delicate Tea-pot. I have ever been jasmine-cradled from my youth. Eons ago, I might say centuries, in '78, when a student at Oxford, I had trampled the vintage of my babyhood, and trod the thorn-spread heights of Poesy. I had stood in the Arena and torn the bays from the expiring athletes, my competitors.”

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LECTURE PROSPECTS

“ Yes ; I expect my Lecture will be a success. So does DOLLAR CARTE—I mean D'OYLEY CARTE. Too-Toothless Senility may jeer, and poor, positive Propriety may shake her rusty curls ; but I am here in my creamy lustihood, to pipe of Passion's venturous Poesy, and reap the scorching harvest of Self-Love ! I am not quite sure

what I mean. The true Poet never is. In fact, true Poetry is nothing if it is intelligible. She is only to be compared to SALMACIS, who is not a boy or girl, but yet is both."

And so forth, and so forth.

About the conversation and superficial manner of Oscar Wilde there must have been something strangely according to formula. Among intimate friends, friends who were sympathetic to his real ideals, his talk was wonderful. That fact is vouched for in a hundred quarters, it is not to be denied.

As I write I have dozens of undeniable testimonies to the fact, I myself can bear witness to it on at least one occasion. But when Wilde was not with people for whose opinion of him he cared much—really cared—his odd perversity of phrase, his persistent wish to astonish the fools, his extraordinary carelessness of average opinion often compelled him to talk the most frantic nonsense which was only redeemed from mere childish inversion of phrase by the air and manner with which it was said, and the merest tinsel pretence of wit. The wittiest talker of his generation, certainly the wittiest writer, gave the very worst of his wit to the pressmen who pestered him but who, and this was the thing he was unable to appreciate at its true value, represented him to the world during this "first period."

The mock interviews in *Punch* which have been quoted from are really no very wide departures from the real thing. A year or two after the Æsthetic movement was not so prominent in the public eye as was the success of Wilde as a writer of plays, an actual interview with him appeared in a well-known weekly paper in which he talked not much less extravagantly than he was caricatured as talking in *Punch*. A play of his had been produced and, while it was a complete and satisfying success, it had been assailed in that unfortunately hostile way by the critics to which he was accustomed.

He was asked what he thought about the attitude of the critics towards his play.

“For a man to be a dramatic critic,” he is said to have replied, “is as foolish and inartistic as it would be for a man to be a critic of epics, or a pastoral critic, or a critic of lyrics. All modes of art are one, and the modes of the art that employs words as its medium are quite indivisible. The result of the vulgar specialisation of criticism is an elaborate scientific knowledge of the stage—almost as elaborate as that of the stage-carpenter, and quite on a par with that of the call-boy—combined with an entire incapacity to realise that a play is a work of art, or to receive any artistic impressions at all.”

He was told that he was rather severe upon the dramatic critics.

"English dramatic criticism of our own day has never had a single success, in spite of the fact that it goes to all the first nights," was his reply.

Thereupon the interviewer suggested that dramatic criticism was at least influential.

"Certainly; that is why it is so bad," he replied, and went on to say:

"The moment criticism exercises any influence it ceases to be criticism. The aim of the true critic is to try and chronicle his own moods, not to try and correct the masterpieces of others."

"Real critics would be charming in your eyes, then?"

"Real critics? Ah, how perfectly charming they would be! I am always waiting for their arrival. An inaudible school would be nice. Why do you not found it?"

Oscar Wilde was asked if there were, then, absolutely no critics in London.

"There are just two," he answered, but refused to give their names. The interviewer goes on to recount his exact words:

"Mr Wilde, with the elaborate courtesy for which he has always been famous, replied, 'I think I had better not mention their names; it might make the others so jealous.'

"What do the literary cliques think of your plays?"

"I don't write to please cliques; I write to

please myself. Besides, I have always had grave suspicions that the basis of all literary cliques is a morbid love of meat-teas. That makes them sadly uncivilised.'

"‘Still, if your critics offend you, why don't you reply to them?’

"‘I have far too much time. But I think some day I will give a general answer, in the form of a lecture, in a public hall, which I shall call “Straight Talks to Old Men.”’

"‘What is your feeling towards your audiences—towards the public?’

"‘Which public? There are as many publics as there are personalities.’

"‘Are you nervous on the night that you are producing a new play?’

"‘Oh no, I am exquisitely indifferent. My nervousness ends at the last dress rehearsal; I know then what effect my play, as presented upon the stage, has produced upon me. My interest in the play ends there, and I feel curiously envious of the public—they have such wonderful fresh emotions in store for them.’

"I laughed, but Mr Wilde rebuked me with a look of surprise.

"‘It is the public, not the play, that I desire to make a success,’ he said.

"‘But I'm afraid I don't quite understand——’

“ ‘The public makes a success when it realises that a play is a work of art. On the three first nights I have had in London the public has been most successful, and had the dimensions of the stage admitted of it, I would have called them before the curtain. Most managers, I believe, call them behind.’ ”

There are pages more of this sort of thing, and the earlier and pretended interview in *Punch* differs a little in period but very little in manner from this real interview.

Punch continued its gibes during the whole time of the first period. Really witty parodies of Oscar Wilde's poems and plays appeared from time to time. Pictures of him were drawn in caricature by well-known artists. It was the same in almost every society. The band of enthusiasts listened to the message, but gave more prominence to the poses and extravagances which accompanied it. The message was obscured and it was the fault of Oscar Wilde's eccentricity.

We are reaping the benefit of it all now, at present I am merely the chronicler of opinion when the movement was in what the unobserving thought was its heyday, but which has proved to be its infancy.

The chorus of dislike and mistrust was almost universal. At Oxford itself, popularly supposed to be a stronghold of æstheticism at the time,

a debate on the question took place at the Union. A very prominent undergraduate of the day, Mr J. A. Simon, of Wadham College, reflected the bulk of Oxford opinion when he spoke as follows :—

“ Mr J. A. Simon (Wadham) said he felt nervous, for it was an extraordinary occasion for him to be on the side that would gain a majority. He did not consider that the motion had at all the meaning the mover gave it. He quite agreed with him as to the advances made in the illustrated press, and other things, and that many of these selected changes were good. The motion, however, evidently referred to the movement headed by Oscar Wilde, and represented by such things as the ‘ Yellow Book,’ etc. He always thought that the mover was most natural when he was on the stage (applause) and they had all been given pleasure by his impersonations (applause). He believed, though, that he had been acting that night, and the speaker quoted from the speeches of Bassanio passages which he considered described the way the mover had led them off the scent. He intended to discuss the matter seriously. As a book entitled ‘ Degeneracy ’ pointed out, the new movement was the outcome of a craving for novelty, and the absurdities in connection with it would do credit to a madhouse. People were eccentric in the hope that they would be

taken to be original (applause). It was not a development at all; it was but a jerk or twitching, the work of a moment. Oscar Wilde had actually signed his name to a most awful pun, as those who had seen 'The Importance Of Being Earnest' would understand. The writer's many epigrams were doubtless clever, for next to pretending to be drunk, pretending to be mad was the most difficult (applause). The process was to turn a proverb upside down, and there was the epigram. Then Aubrey Beardsley's figures, if they showed anything, showed extraordinary development; they certainly were not delicate; in fact, he should call them distinctly indelicate. For one thing, such creatures never existed, and it was a species of art that was absolutely imbecile. Oscar Wilde, though, had said that until we see things as they are not we never really live. But all he could say was that he hoped he should never live (applause). It was really not art at all, for art was nearly allied to nature, although Oscar Wilde said that the only connecting link was a really well-made buttonhole. That sort of thing was the art of being brilliantly absurd (applause). It was insignificant to lay claim to manners on the ground of personal appearance; such were not manners but mannerisms. Aubrey Beardsley's figures were but a mannerism of this sort (applause). A development must

be new and permanent, and the pictures referred to were not new, for similar ones could be found on the old Egyptian monuments (applause). This cult were not even original individually, for where one led all the rest followed. Oscar Wilde talked about a purple sin: the others did the same. By-the-by, that remark was not original, for scarlet sins had been mentioned in very early days; it was indeed all of it but a resuscitation of what was old and had been long left behind by the rest of the world (applause). The movement was not permanent, as might be seen by the æsthetic craze of fifteen years ago. Velvet coats and peacock feathers were dying out, and soon it would not be correct to wear the hair long (laughter). It was but a phase; if everyone were to talk in epigrams it would be distinguished to talk sense. He was in a difficulty, for if he got a large majority against the motion, to be in a minority was just what would please the æsthètes most. Therefore, let as few vote against as possible (laughter). To be serious, he considered that true art should give pleasure and comfort to people who were in trouble or down in the world, and who, he asked, would be helped by the art of either Aubrey Beardsley or Oscar Wilde? (applause). In conclusion, he would ask the House to give the movers the satisfaction of having as few as possible voting for them (applause)."

"*Ars longa est!* All know what once that meant;
 But cranks corrupt so sickeningly have shindied
 About *their* ART of late, 'tis evident
 The rendering now must be, 'Art is long-winded!'
 For *Vita brevis*,—all true men must hope,
 Brief life for such base Art—and a short rope!"

said a popular rhyme of the time. It sums up average opinion and may fittingly close this summary of it during the "Æsthetic" period.

We are forced to admit that the general misunderstanding was partially due to the fashion in which the new doctrines were presented. The thing was well worth saying, but it was not said seriously enough. It was a lamentable mistake, but it helps us to understand a certain aspect of Oscar Wilde: the man.

THE SECOND PERIOD

At the time in which what I have called the "second period" may be said to have begun, Wilde was emerging from the somewhat obscuring influences of the Æsthetic movement and was in a state of transition.

He was then editing a magazine known as *The Woman's World*, and doing his work with a conscientiousness and sense of responsibility which shows us another side of him and one which, to the sane, if limited, English temperament is a singularly pleasant one. He had

moaned, money must be earned, and he earned it faithfully under a discipline. It is a speculation not without interest when we wonder to what heights such a man might not have risen if a discipline such as this had been more continuous.

“Lord of himself, that heritage of woe,” sang Lord Byron, well aware from personal experience of the constant dangers, the almost certain shipwreck that the life of perfect freedom has for such as he was, and for such a temperament as Wilde’s also.

Oscar was living in a beautiful house at Chelsea, and it is a remarkable instance of how surely the first period had merged into the second when we find that the decorations of his home were beautiful indeed, but not much like those he had preached about and insisted on in his æsthetic lectures and writings.

There was an utter lack of so-called æsthetic colouring in the house where Mr and Mrs Wilde had made their home. The scheme consisted, indeed, of faded and delicate brocades, against a background of white or cream painting, and was French rather than English.

Rare engravings and etchings formed a deep frieze along two sides of the drawing-room, and stood out on a dull-gold background, while the only touches of bright colour in the apartment were lent by two splendid Japanese feathers let into the ceiling, while, above the white, carved

mantelpiece, a gilt-copper bas-relief, by Donaghue, made living Oscar Wilde's fine verses, "Requiescat."

Not the least interesting work of art in this characteristic sitting-room was a quaint harmony in greys and browns, purporting to be a portrait of the master of the house as a youth ; a painting which was a wedding present from Mr Harper Pennington, the American artist.

The house could boast of an exceptionally choice gallery of contemporary art. Close to a number of studies of Venice, presented by Mr Whistler himself, hung an exquisite pen-and-ink illustration by Walter Crane. An etching of Bastien Le Page's portrait of Sarah Bernhardt contained in the margin a few kindly words written in English by the great tragedienne.

Mrs Oscar Wilde herself had strong ideas upon house decoration. She once told an inquirer that "no one who has not tried them knows the value of uniform tints and a quiet scheme of colouring. One of the most effective effects in house decoration can be obtained by having, say, the sitting-room pure cream or white, with, perhaps, a dado of six or seven feet from the ground. In an apartment of this kind, ample colouring and variety will be introduced by the furniture, engravings, and carpet ; in fact, but for the trouble of keeping white walls in London clean, I do not think there can be anything

prettier and more practical than this mode of decoration, for it is both uncommon and easy to carry out. I am not one of those," continued Mrs Wilde, "who believe that beauty can only be achieved at considerable cost. A cottage parlour may be, and often is, more beautiful, with its unconsciously achieved harmonies and soft colouring, than a great reception-room, arranged more with a view to producing a magnificent effect. But I repeat, of late, people, in their wish to decorate their homes, have blended various periods, colourings and designs, each perhaps beautiful in itself, but producing an unfortunate effect when placed in juxtaposition. I object also to historic schemes of decoration, which nearly always make one think of the upholsterer, and not of the owner of the house."

In conjunction with her husband, Mrs Wilde had also thought out the right place of flowers in the decoration of a house. She would say: "It is impossible to have too many flowers in a room, and I think that scattering cut blossoms on a tablecloth is both a foolish and a cruel custom, for long before dinner is over the poor things begin to look painfully parched and thirsty for want of water. A few delicate flowers in plain glass vases produce a prettier effect than a great number of nosegays, and yet, even though people may see that something

is wrong, many do not realise how easily a charming effect might be produced with the same materials somewhat differently disposed.

“A Japanese native room, for example, is furnished with dainty simplicity, and one flower and one pot supply the Jap’s æsthetic longing for decoration. When he gets tired of his flower and his pot, he puts them away, and seeks for some other scheme of colour produced by equally simple means.”

Oscar Wilde now began to take a definite place in the English social world. His wit, his brilliance of conversation, his singular charm of manner all combined to render him a welcome guest, and in many cases a valued friend, in circles where distinction of intellect and charm of personality are the only passports. He began to make money and to indulge a natural taste for profusion and splendour. Yet, let it be said here, and said with emphasis, that greatly as he desired, and acquired, the elegances of life, increasing fortune found him as kind and generous as before. It is a known fact that he gave away large sums of money to those less fortunate in the effort to make an income by artistic pursuits. His purse was always open to the struggling and the unhappy and his influence constantly exerted on their behalf.

Suddenly all London was captured by the brilliant modern comedies he began to write.

Success of the completest kind had arrived, the poet's name was in everyone's mouth. Curiously enough it is the French students of Wilde's career who have paid the most attention to Wilde in this second period. The man of society, the witty talker, the maker of epigrams—Wilde at his apogee just before his fall—this is the picture on which the Latin psychologists have liked to dwell.

“In our days, the master of repartee and the after-dinner speaker is foredoomed to forgetfulness, for he always stands alone, and to gain applause has to talk down to and flatter lower-class audiences. No writer of blood-curdling melodramas, no weaver of newspaper novels is obliged to lower his talent so much as the professional wit. If the genius of Mallarmé was obscured by the flatterers that surrounded him, how much more was Wilde's talent overclouded by the would-be-witty, shoddy-elegant, and cheaply-poetical society hangers-on, who covered him with incense. We are told that the first attempts of the sparkling talker were by no means successful in the Parisian salons.

“In the house of Victor Hugo, seeing he must wait to let the veteran sleep out his nap whilst others among the guests slumbered also, he made up his mind to astonish them. He succeeded, but at what a cost! Although he was a verse writer, most sincerely devoted to poetry and art,

and one of the most emotional and sensitive and tender-hearted amongst modern wielders of the pen, he succeeded in gaining only a reputation for artificiality.

“We all know his studied paradoxes, his five or six continually repeated tales, but we are tempted to forget the charming dreamer who was full of tenderness for everything in nature.”

Thus M. Charles Grolleau, and there is much in his point of view. The writer of “The Happy Prince” and “The House of Pomegranates” is a different person from the paradoxical *causeur* who went cometlike through a few London and Paris seasons before disappearing into the darkness of space.

And it was the encouragement and applause bestowed upon Oscar Wilde during the second period that not only confirmed him in his determination to live as the complete *flaneur*, but which prevented even sympathetic critics from appreciating his work at its true worth.

The late M. Hugues Rebelle, who knew him fairly intimately, said of him :

“It is true that Mallarmé has not written much, but all he has done is valuable. Some of his verses are most beautiful, whilst Wilde seemed never to finish anything. The works of the English æsthete are very interesting, because they characterise his epoch ; his pages are useful from a documentary point of view,

but are not extraordinary from a literary standpoint. In the 'Duchess of Padua,' he imitates Hugo and Sardou; the 'Picture of Dorian Gray' was inspired by Huysmans; 'Intentions' is a *vade mecum* of symbolism, and all the ideas contained therein are to be found in Mallarmé and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam. As for Wilde's poetry, it closely follows the lines laid down by Swinburne. His most original composition is 'Poems in Prose.' They give a correct idea of his home-chat, but not when he was at his best; that, no doubt, is because the art of talking must always be inferior to any form of literary composition. Thoughts properly set forth in print after due correction must always be more charming than a finely sketched idea hurriedly enunciated when conversing with a few disciples. In ordinary table-talk we meet nothing more than ghosts of new-born ideas foredoomed to perish. The jokes of a wit seldom survive the speaker. When we quote the epigrams of Wilde, it is as if we were exhibiting in a glass case a collection of beautiful butterflies, whose wings have lost the brilliancy of their once gaudy colours. Lively talk pleases, because of the man who utters it, and we are impressed also by the gestures which accompany his frothy discourse. What remains of the sprightly quips and anecdotes of such celebrated *hommes d'esprit* as Scholl, Becque, Barbey d'Aurevilly! Some

stories of the eighteenth century have been transmitted to us by Chamfort, but only because he carefully remodelled them by the aid of his clever pen."

Yet during all the time of his success, when he was receiving flattery enough, celebrity enough, money enough to turn the head of a far stronger-willed man than he was, there is abundant evidence of a frequent aspiration after better things. Serene and lofty moods came to him now and again and found utterance in his words or writings.

From the very beginning of his career he had been in the public eye. Now he had, it seemed, come into his own. The years of ridicule and misrepresentation, the years of the first period, were over and done with. A real and solid popularity seemed to be his. Yet, just as he had spoilt and obscured his æsthetic message by those eccentricities which the Anglo-Saxon mind will not permit in anyone who comes professing to teach it, so now Oscar Wilde was to spoil the triumphs of the second period by a mental intoxication that led him step by step to ultimate ruin and disgrace.

At this moment let us sum up the results at which we have arrived in the study of this complex character. We are all of us complex, but Wilde was more strangely compounded than the ordinary man in exact proportion as his

intelligence was greater and his power beyond the general measure. This much and no more.

We have seen that the great fault of Wilde's career up to this period was that of an unconquerable egoism. He was complex only because such mighty gifts as those with which he was dowered were united to a temperament naturally gracious, kindly, and that of a gentleman in the best sense of the word, while both were obscured by a self-appreciation and confidence which reached not only the heights of absurdity but surely impinged upon the borders of mental failure. As he himself said over and over again after his downfall, he had nobody but himself to blame for it. Generous-hearted, free with all material things, kind to the unfortunate, gentle to the weak—Oscar Wilde was all these things. Yet, at the same time, he committed the most dreadful crimes against the social well-being; without a thought of those his influence led into terrible paths, without a thought of those nearest and dearest to him, he deliberately imposed upon them a horror and a shame with an extraordinary and almost unparalleled callousness and hardness of heart.

Bound up in the one man were the twin natures of an angel of light and an angel of dark. It is the same with all men, but never perhaps in the history of the world, certainly never in the history of literature, is there to be found a

contrast so astonishing. It is not for the writer of this study to hold the balance and to say which part of his nature predominated. Opinion about him is still divided into two camps, and this book is a statement from which everyone can draw his own conclusion, and does not attempt to do more than provide the materials for doing so. Yet, the explanation of it all, if explanation there is, seems simple enough.

Y There was an extraordinary and abnormal divorce between will-power and intelligence. Heavy indulgence grew and grew and gradually obscured the finer nature until he imagined his will was supreme and his wishes the only law. The royal intellect dominated the soul and grew by what it fed on, until it unseated the reason, and Wilde fell never to rise again, except only in his work.

At the end of the second period came the frightful exposure and scandals which sent the author into prison. It is no part of this book to touch upon these scandals or to do more than breathe the kindly hope that Wilde was unconscious of what he did, and was totally incapable of realising its enormity.

The third period, in this attempt at chronicling the various phases of his life and temperament, might be said to have begun on the day of his arrest, when his long agony and punishment were to begin. Greatly as he deserved a

heavy punishment, not so much as for what he did to himself but because of the corrupting influence his life and association with others had upon a large section of society, it is yet a moot point whether he did not suffer for others and was made their scapegoat. The true history of this terrible period cannot be written and never will be written. Yet, those who know it in its entirety will say that Wilde bore the penalty for the transgressions of many other people in addition to the just punishment he received for his own.

Few nobler things can be said of any man than this. Let it be eternally placed to his credit that he made no endeavour to lighten his own punishment by implicating others. In more than one instance the betrayal of a friend would undoubtedly have lessened the cumulative burden of the indictment brought against him. He betrayed none of his friends.

THE THIRD PERIOD

This beautiful thread of brightness in the dark warp and woof of Wilde's life at this moment must not be forgotten by those who would estimate his character. It is one of the few relieving lights in the blackness with which the third period opens. And yet, there is still

something that can be said for Wilde at this time which certainly provides the student with another aspect of him. / It is the way in which he met his fate and was prepared to endure his punishment, although it would have been simple for him to have avoided it. To avoid the consequences of what he had done, inasmuch as the ruin of his career is concerned, was, of course, impossible. That, indeed, was to be the heaviest part of his penalty. Yet, had he so chosen, imprisonment and the frightful agony of the two years need never have been his portion. A French critic writing of him in the *Mercure de France* takes an analytical view of this fact, which I do not think is the true one, though, nevertheless, it is interesting. He says: "Neither his own heedlessness nor the envious and hypocritical anger of his enemies, nor the snobbish cruelty of social reprobation were the true cause of his misfortunes. It was he himself who, after a time of horrible anguish, consented to his punishment, with a sort of supercilious disdain for the weakness of human will, and out of a certain regard and unhealthy curiosity for the sportfulness of fate. Here was a voluptuary seeking for torture and desiring pain after having wallowed in every sensual pleasure. Can such conduct have been due to aught else but sheer madness?"

That is all very well, but it does not bear the

stamp of truth. It is an interesting point of view and nothing more. The conduct of Wilde when he at last came athwart the horror of his destiny, when he realised what all the world realised, that he must answer for his sins before the public justice of England, was not unheroic, nor without a fine and splendid dignity. At this time I would much prefer to say, and all the experiences of those around him confirm it, that Wilde knew that it was his duty to himself to endure what society was about to mete out to him. To say that he was a mere gloomy and jaded voluptuary who wished to taste the pleasures of the most horrible and sordid pain, is surely to talk something perilously like nonsense, though full of one of those minute psychological presumptions so dear to a certain type of Latin mind.

Let it be remembered that Oscar Wilde refused to betray his friends, and in the light of that fact, let us see whether his motive for remaining in England to "face the music," as his brother, William Wilde, expressed it, was not something high and worthy in the midst of this hideous wreck and bankruptcy of his fortune. A friend who was with him then, his biographer, and a man of position in English letters, said that when the subject of flight was discussed, he declared to Wilde that, in his opinion, it was the best thing he could do, not only in his own

interests but in those of the public too. This self-sacrificing friend offered to take all the responsibility of the flight upon his own shoulders and to make all the arrangements for it being carried out.

It must be remembered that, at the time Wilde was out on bail, and it has since been proved, with as much certainty as anything of the sort can be proved, that he was not watched by the police, and that even between the periods of his first and second trials, if he had secretly left the country and sought a safe asylum on the Continent, everybody would have felt relieved and the public would have been spared a repetition of the horrors which had already filled the pages of the newspapers to repletion. After the collapse of the action Oscar Wilde brought against Lord Queensberry, he was allowed several hours before the warrant for his arrest was executed in order that he might leave the country. "But imitative of great men in their whims and fancies, he refused to imitate the base in acts which he deemed cowardly. I do not think he ever seriously considered the question of leaving the country, and this, in spite of the fact that the gentleman who was responsible for almost the whole of the bail, had said, 'it will practically ruin me if I lose all that money at the present moment, but if there is a chance, even after conviction, in God's name let him go.'"

Whatever Wilde's motive was for staying to "face the music," we cannot deny that it was fine. Either he felt that he must endure the punishment society was to give him because he had outraged the law of society, or else he was unwilling to ruin the disinterested and noble-minded man—a gentleman who had only the slightest acquaintance with him—who had furnished the amount of his bail.

Let these facts be written to his credit and considered when the readers of this memoir pass their judgment upon his character.

At the beginning of this third period public opinion which, but a short time ago, had simply meant a chorus of public adulation, except for a minority of people who either envied his successes or honestly reprobated his attitude towards art and life, was now terribly bitter, venomous, and full of spleen and hatred.

Society, however much society was disposed to deny the fact, had set up an idol in their midst. It was partly owing to the senseless and indiscriminate adulation of its idol that its foundations were undermined and that it fell with so resonant a crash. When it was down society assailed it with every ingenuity of reprobation and hatred that it knew how to voice and use.

Nothing was too bad to be said about the erstwhile favourite who, let it be remembered, was not yet adjudged guilty but who, if ever a

man was, was denied the application of the prime principle of English criminal law, which says that every man accused is to be deemed innocent until guilt has been proved against him. People gloated over the downfall.

When Wilde was first arrested and placed in Holloway, and before he was admitted to bail, the more scurrilous portion of the press was full of sickening pictures, both in line and words, of the fallen creature's agony.

Contrasts were drawn by little pens dipped in venom, and the writer of this memoir has in his possession a curious and saddening collection of the screeds of those days, a collection which shows how innate the principle of cruelty is still in the human mind despite centuries of civilisation and the influence of the Cross, which forbids gladiators to slay each other in the arena but allows a more subtle and terrible form of savage sport than anything that Nero or Caligula ever saw or promulgated.

It is unnecessary to quote largely from the productions which disgraced the English press at this time. One single article will serve to prove the point. Let those who read it learn tolerance from this mock sympathy and cruel dwelling upon the tortures of one so recently high in public popularity and esteem, still presumably innocent by English law, and yet placed under the vulgar microscope of the

morbid-minded and the lovers of sensation at any cost.

“Figuratively speaking but yesterday Oscar Wilde was the man of the hour, and to him, and him alone, we looked for our wit, our epigrams, and our learned and interesting plays. But what a change! To-day, Oscar Wilde, the wit, the epicure, is gone from his world, and is languishing in a dreary cell in Holloway Prison. In short, Mr Wilde, in a moment of weak-headedness, walked over the side of the mountain of fame and fell headlong from its height to the morass below, to lie there forgotten, neglected and abused.

“Yes, although I have little or no sympathy with Oscar Wilde I cannot but help feeling for him in his altered circumstances. He is a man who from his very infancy has been nursed in the lap of luxury, and has systematically lived on the fat of the land. Mr Wilde’s residence in Tite Street was elegantly and luxuriously furnished. His rooms at the Cadogan Hotel were all that comfort could desire. His room, or rather cell, in Holloway Prison is altogether undesirable, is badly furnished, ill-lighted, and uncomfortable. Picture to yourself this change—yes, a change effected within twenty-four hours—and then you can imagine what the mental and physical sufferings of a man of the Oscar Wilde temperament must be. It is in this sense alone that my

sympathy goes out towards him, and I feel as a man for another man who has been suddenly snatched from the lap of indolent, free livelihood and suddenly pitched foremost into the icelike crevasse of a British prison cell.

“I will now describe in as few words as I possibly can, but with absolute accuracy and detail, the cell in which Mr Wilde spends his time and the manner in which he lives. The cell in which Oscar is incarcerated is not an ordinary one—that is, it is not one that is used by any condemned or ordinary prisoner under remand. The cell is known in prison *parlance* as a ‘special cell,’ for the use of which a fee is payable to the authorities, and is the same one as was occupied by a certain well-known Duchess some few months back when she was committed by the Queen’s Bench Judges for contempt of court. The prison authorities only supply the ‘cell,’ the prisoner himself has to find his own furniture, which he usually hires, by the advice of one of the warders, from a local firm who have a suite they keep for the use of this ‘special cell’ in Holloway. When Mr Wilde arrived at the prison last Saturday week afternoon this ‘cell’ was vacant. He promptly gave orders for the furniture to be brought in, and in an incredibly short space of time the cell was furnished, and the distinguished prisoner took possession of his apartment. I will first describe the room, and then take one typical day

in the prison routine, which will clearly show the kind of life that Mr Wilde is compelled to live.

“Now to the cell. The room is situated at the far end of the east wing of the prison, and is entered from the long passage which runs from the head warder’s rooms past the convict cells, and terminates at the door which protects Oscar from the common herd, and helps to make him secure. The door is an ordinary prison cell door, possessing spyholes and flaptrap, and large iron bars and locks. The cell itself is about 10 ft. broad, 12ft. long, and 11 ft. high. The walls are not papered but whitewashed, and the light by which the room is supplied is obtained through an iron-barred window in the wall placed high up and well out of the prisoner’s reach. A small fireplace is also fixed securely at the end of the room, but it is seldom lit, as the room is well heated by hot-water pipes. Now to the furniture in the room. Just on the right-hand side of the window is placed a table made of hard, white wood. No cloth covers it, but at the back is placed a looking-glass, whilst on the table itself is a water jug and a Bible. Near the table and almost under the window is an arm-chair, in which Oscar spends most of his time. But more of this anon. In the corner near the fireplace is placed a small camp bedstead, which is so small that it seems almost an impossibility that so massive a form as

that of Oscar could recline with any ease upon so small a space. No feather bed is upon the iron supports, and the sleeper is compelled to repose upon hard—probably too hard—mattresses. The bed is supplied with sheets, blankets, and a cover quilt, made up of patches of all colours of the rainbow. This quilt is not pretty, and most considerably upsets the artistic being of a man like Wilde. A small table on the other side of the room, another chair, and a small metal washing stand, go to make up all the furniture the room possesses. No carpet is on the floor, but the boards are kept scrupulously clean. This I think briefly comprises a description of Mr Wilde's residential and sleeping compartment. Now to his daily routine and the life he is compelled to lead. He is awakened by a warder at six o'clock, and whether he likes it or not, is compelled to get up. After washing himself in cold water—hot is not permitted—and using ordinary common soap, Mr Wilde dresses himself, and to do him justice, he turns himself out very neat and span considering he has no valet to wait upon him. At seven o'clock one of the convicted prisoners enters Mr Wilde's cell, cleans up the room, makes the bed, and generally tidies up the place. For this service the prisoner receives 1s. per week, and it usually takes him quite half-an-hour per day to get through his work. Truly a munificent remuneration, but

then prison regulations, whenever reasonable, are on the side of liberality. At half-past seven o'clock Wilde's breakfast, usually consisting of tea, ham and eggs, or a chop, toast and bread and butter, arrives from a well-known restaurant in Holloway. Of course Mr Wilde pays for the food, and, within reason, can eat and drink what he pleases.

"At nine o'clock Mr Wilde is compelled to leave his cell, and proceed to the exercising yard of the prison, and for one hour he is compelled to walk at regulation pace round a kind of tower erected in the centre of the yard. After exercise the distinguished prisoner returns to his cell, and the daily newspapers are brought to him, for which he also pays. Mr Wilde sits during the time he is in his cell in the chair by the window, and then reads his papers. He, however, has moments of very low-spiritedness, and becomes almost despondent in the moods. The sketch in this issue represents him seated in his favourite chair, with a paper in his hand, and, after an interview with his solicitor, Mr Wilde is very fond, when his active brain is working too deeply, to push back his hair from off his forehead and then leave the hand on the head, and, as if staring into vacancy, sit for hours in this position thinking deeply. But, to continue, at twelve o'clock Mr Wilde's lunch arrives from the restaurant, for which he pays. It consists

of a cut off the joint, vegetables, cheese, and biscuits and water, or one glass of wine. After lunch he is again taken to the exercise ground for an hour, and then sent back to his cell. Still seated in his chair, he still reads his papers, and thinks out improbable problems. Sometimes one of his friends comes to see him. On these occasions he brightens up, but after the visits of his solicitor he is visibly very low-spirited and morose. At six o'clock Mr Wilde's dinner—for which he pays—arrives. It consists usually of soup, fish, joint, or game, cheese, and half-a-pint of any wine he chooses to select. The dinner finished, Mr Wilde sits again in his chair, and the agony he endures at not being allowed even a whiff at his favourite cigarette must to him be agony indeed. At eight o'clock a warder enters his room and places a lamp on the table to light the room. At nine o'clock the same warder again enters the room and gives Oscar five minutes to undress himself and get into bed. He complies willingly but with a sigh. When he is safely in bed the warder removes the lamp, bolts and locks the door, and leaves Oscar to sleep or remain awake thinking, just as he pleases. Oscar, however, does not sleep much. He is out of bed most of the night, and in unstockinged feet paces the room in apparently not too good a mood. Yes, poor Oscar, I do pity you."

So much for popular kindness !

The trial, at which the accused man was admitted by everyone to have comported himself with a dignity and resignation that had nothing of that levity and occasional pose which must be allowed to have characterised his attitude during the two former ordeals, came to a close. Wilde was sentenced to prison for two years' hard labour.

During the trial, of course, no comment was permissible, though there were not wanting some papers who committed contempt of court. When, however, the sentence had been pronounced and Wilde as a man with a place in society—I am using the word society here not in its limited but its economic sense—had ceased to exist, then the thunders of the important and influential journals were let loose.

The Daily Telegraph which, to do it justice, had never been sympathetic to Wilde in his days of prosperity and fame, came out with a most weighty and severe condemnation. The article, from which I am about to quote an extract, certainly represented the opinion of the country at the time—as *The Daily Telegraph* has nearly always represented the mass of opinion of the country at any given moment. To the sympathisers with Wilde this article will seem unnecessarily cruel and severe. But to those who have taken into account the best that

has been written herein about him during this terrible third period, and who have realised that the writer simply states facts and does not desire to comment on them, the article will seem only a natural and dignified expression of a truth which was hardly controvertible.

“No sterner rebuke could well have been inflicted on some of the artistic tendencies of the time than the condemnation on Saturday of Oscar Wilde at the Central Criminal Court. We have not the slightest intention of reviewing once more all the sordid incidents of a case which has done enough, and more than enough, to shock the conscience and outrage the moral instincts of the community. The man has now suffered the penalties of his career, and may well be allowed to pass from that platform of publicity which he loved into that limbo of disrepute and forgetfulness which is his due. The grave of contemptuous oblivion may rest on his foolish ostentation, his empty paradoxes, his insufferable posturing, his incurable vanity. Nevertheless, when we remember that he enjoyed a certain popularity among some sections of society, and, above all, when we reflect that what was smiled at as insolent braggadocio was the cover for, or at all events ended in, flagrant immorality, it is well, perhaps, that the lesson of his life should not be passed over without some insistence on the terrible warning of his fate.

Young men at the universities, clever sixth-form boys at public schools, silly women who lend an ear to any chatter which is petulant and vivacious, novelists who have sought to imitate the style of paradox and unreality, poets who have lisped the language of nerveless and effeminate libertinage—these are the persons who should ponder with themselves the doctrines and the career of the man who has now to undergo the righteous sentence of the law. We speak sometimes of a school of Decadents and *Æsthetes* in England, although it may well be doubted whether at any time its prominent members could not have been counted on the fingers of one hand; but, quite apart from any fixed organisation or body such as may or may not exist in Paris, there has lately shown itself in London a contemporary bias of thought, an affected manner of expression and style, and a few loudly vaunted ideas which have had a limited but evil influence on all the better tendencies of art and literature. Of these the prisoner of Saturday constituted himself a representative. He set an example, so far as in him lay, to the weaker and the younger brethren; and, just because he possessed considerable intellectual powers and unbounded assurance, his fugitive success served to dazzle and bewilder those who had neither experience nor knowledge of the principles which he travestied, or of that

true temple of art of which he was so unworthy an acolyte. Let us hope that his removal will serve to clear the poisoned air, and make it cleaner and purer for all healthy and unvitiated lungs."

It was the duty of a great journal to say what it said. Yet, nevertheless, a certain wave of sorrow seemed to pass over the press generally, and hostile comment on the *débâcle* was not unmingled with regret for the unhappy man himself. The doctrines he was supposed to have preached to the world at large were sternly denied and thundered against. His own fate was, in the majority of cases, treated with a sorrowful regret.

Yet, nobody realised at all that in condemning what was supposed to be the teaching and doctrine of Oscar Wilde, they were condemning merely supposititious deduction from his manner of life, which could not be in the least substantiated by any single line he had ever written.

All through this first part of the book I have insisted upon the fact that the man's life and the man's work should not be regarded as identical. To-day, as I write, that attitude has taken complete possession of the public mind. As was said in the first few pages of the memoir, the whole of Europe is taking a sympathetic and intelligent interest in the supreme art of the genius who produced so many beautiful things.

The public seems to have learned its lesson at last, but at the beginning of what I have called the third period it was unable to differentiate between the criminal, part of whose life was shameful, and the artist, all of whose works were pure, stimulating, and splendid. I quote but a few words from the printed comments upon Wilde's downfall. They are taken from the well-known society paper *Truth*, and the writer seems to strike only a note of wonder and amazement. The horrible fact of Wilde's conviction had startled England, had startled the writer, and a writer by no means unsympathetic in effect, into the following paragraphs:—

“For myself, I turned into the Lyceum for half-an-hour, just to listen, when the performance was actually stopped by the great shout of congratulation that welcomed the first entrance of ‘Sir Henry.’ Yet, through all these cheers I seemed to hear the dull rumble of the prison van in which Oscar Wilde made his last exit—to Holloway. While the great actor-manager stood in the plenitude of position bowing and bowing again, to countless friends and admirers, again there rose before my eyes the last ghastly scene at the Old Bailey—I heard the voice of the foreman in its low but steady answer, ‘Guilty,’ ‘Guilty,’ ‘Guilty,’ as count after count was rehearsed by the clerk. I heard again that last awful admonition from the judge. I remembered

how there had flitted through my mind the recollection of a night at St James's, the cigarette, and the green carnation, as the prisoner, broken, beaten, tottering, tried to steady himself against the dock rail and asked in a strange, dry, ghost-like voice if he might address the judge. Then came the volley of hisses, the prison warders, the rapid break-up of the Court, the hurry into the blinding sunshine outside, where some half-score garishly dressed, loose women of the town danced on the pavement a kind of carmagnole of rejoicing at the verdict. 'He'll 'ave 'is 'air cut regglar *now*,' says one of them; and the others laughed stridently. I came away. I did not laugh, for the matter is much too serious for laughter.

"The more I think about the case of Oscar Wilde, my dear Dick, the more astounding does the whole thing seem to me. So far as the man himself is concerned, it would be charitable to assume that he is not quite sane. Without considering—for the moment—the moral aspect of the matter, here was a man who must have known that the commission of certain acts constituted in the eye of the Law a criminal offence. But no thought of wife or children, no regard, to put it selfishly, for his own brilliant prospects, could induce him to curb a depraved appetite which led him—a gentleman and a scholar—to consort with the vilest and most depraved scum of the town."

Although, as I have said, printed comment was in one way reserved and not ungenerous, the public and spoken comment on the case was utterly and totally cruel. Those readers who remember the period of which I am writing will bear me witness as to the universal chorus of hatred which rose and bubbled all over the country.

This was natural enough.

One cannot expect mob law to be tolerant or to understand the myriad issues and influences which go to make up any given event. The public was right from its own point of view in all it said. To give instances from personal recollection or the personal recollection of others of this terrible shout of condemnation and hatred would be too painful for writer and reader alike.

While in prison Oscar Wilde wrote his marvellous book "De Profundis." The reader will find that work very fully dealt with in its due place in this work. It is not, therefore, necessary to say very much about it in this first part of the volume which I have headed "Oscar Wilde: the Man." It may not be out of place, however, to say that grave doubts were thrown upon the truth of the statement that the book was written in prison. Upon its publication rumours were circulated that the author wrote "De Profundis" at his ease in Paris or in Naples, and finally the rumours crystallised in a letter which was sent

to *The St James's Gazette*, the gist of which was as follows :—

“ I have very strong doubts that it was written in prison, and the gentleman who asserts that he received the MSS. before the expiration of the sentence in Reading Gaol ought to procure a confirmatory testimony to a proceeding which is contrary to all prison discipline. If there is one thing more strictly carried out than another it is that a prisoner shall not be allowed to handle pen, ink, and paper, except when he writes the letter to his friends, which, until the Prison Act, 1899, was once every three months. Each prisoner can amuse himself with a slate and pencil, but not pen and ink. It is now, and was, absolutely forbidden by the prison authorities.

“ As was seen in Adolf Beck's case, where nine petitions appear in the Commissioner's Report (Blue Book), a prisoner's liberty, fortune, reputation, and life may be at stake, but he must tell his story on two and a half sheets of foolscap. Not a scrap of paper is allowed over the regulation sheets. In a local prison Oscar Wilde could apply for the privilege of a special visit or a letter, and probably would receive it, but as the official visitors of prisoners are simply parts of a solemn farce, and there is no such stereotyped method as giving a prisoner the slightest relief in matters affecting the intellect, I have grave doubts that such facilities were given as sup-

plying pen, ink and paper to write 'De Profundis.'

"If it was otherwise the following process would have had to be gone through, either an application to the official prison visitor (possibly Major Arthur Griffiths) for leave to have pen, ink and paper in his cell, which would be refused. By the influence of friends, or the statement of his solicitors that they required special instructions in reference to some evidence, his case, or his property, leave might be granted, but not for journalistic or literary purposes. Had Oscar Wilde's sentence been that of a 'first-class misdemeanant' he could have had those privileges, but I never heard that his sentence was mitigated in this respect.

"Or, he might have applied to the visiting magistrates. In either case there would be a record of such facilities, and the Governor of Reading Gaol, the chaplain, and other officials can satisfy the public as well as the Prison Commissioners. If the book was written in prison then it is clear the officials made a distinction between Oscar Wilde and other prisoners.

"There is some glamour about books written in prisons. The 'Pilgrim's Progress' is a prison book, but Bedford Gaol was a pretty easy dungeon. Under the old *régime* such men as William Corbett, Orator Hunt, and Richard Carlile, conducted their polemic warfare in prison.

The last Chartist leader (the late Mr Ernest Jones) used to tell how he wrote the 'Painter of Florence' and other poems in a London gaol while confined for sedition. It was a common subject of conversation with his young disciples how, as ink was denied in Coldbath Street Prison, he made incisions in his arm and wrote his poetry in his own blood. We believed it then, but as we grew older that feeling of doubt made us sceptical. Thomas Cooper's prison rhyme, the 'Purgatory of Suicides,' and his novel, the 'Baron's Yule Feast,' were written during his two years' imprisonment in Stafford Gaol for preaching a 'universal strike' as a means of establishing a British Republic.

"As 'De Profundis' is likely to be a classic, is it not as well to have this question thrashed out at the beginning and not leave it to the twenty-first century?"

The editor of "De Profundis" replied in a short letter saying, in effect, that he was not concerned to add anything to his definite statement in the preface of the book, a course with which everyone will be in agreement. To answer a busybody throwing doubts upon the statement of an honourable gentleman is a mistake. The matter, however, went a little further and was eventually set finally at rest.

In *The Daily Mirror* a facsimile of a page of the manuscript written on prison paper was

reproduced, and Mr Hamilton Fyfe accompanied the letterpress by informing the public that he had seen the whole of the manuscript of "De Profundis." It was written on blue foolscap paper with the prison stamp on the top. There were about 60,000 words, of which altogether not more than one-third were published in the English edition. The explanation of the fact that the prisoner was allowed to write in his cell is perfectly simple.

Oscar Wilde handed this roll of paper to Mr Robert Ross on the day of his release, and gave him absolute discretion as to printing it. He had written most of it during the last three months of his two years' sentence. It was during the last half-year of his term that Wilde was allowed the special privilege of writing as much as he pleased. His friends represented to the Home Office that a man who had been accustomed to use his brain so continually was in danger of having his mind injured by being unable to write for so long a time as two years.

Dr Nicholson, of Broadmoor, who was consulted on the point, said he thought this danger was quite a real one. So the necessary permission was given, and Wilde could write whatever he liked.

Later on the prison regulations were relaxed again. As a rule, prisoners are not allowed to take away with them what they have written in

their cells. Strictly, the MS. of "De Profundis" ought to have remained among the archives of Reading Gaol.

The authorities realised, however, that to enforce this rule in Wilde's case would have been harsh and unreasonable, so when (in order to defeat the intentions of the late Lord Queensberry and his hired bullies) he was removed from Reading to Wandsworth Prison, on the evening before his release he took the MS. with him; and he had it under his arm when he left the gloomy place next morning a free man.

This statement, and the facsimile printed above, should make it impossible henceforward for anyone to suggest, as many have been suggesting quite recently, that there is any doubt about the whole of the book having been written by Oscar Wilde during the time he was in prison.

The development of Oscar Wilde during his incarceration has, of course, been summed up and stated for all time by himself in the marvellous pages of "De Profundis." Yet, there are various accounts of that time of agony which do but go to show what a really purifying and salutary influence even the awful torture he underwent had upon the unhappy man. By those who knew him in prison he is described as living a life which, in its simple resignation, its kindly gentleness, its sweetness of demeanour,

was the life of a saint. No bitterness or harsh word ever escaped him. When opportunity occurred of doing some tiny and furtive kindness that kindness was always forthcoming. Those who rejoiced at the fact of Wilde's imprisonment may well pause now when the true story of it has filtered through various channels and is generally known. He himself told Monsieur André Gide a strange and pathetic story of those silent, unhappy hours.

He speaks of one of the Governors under whose rule he lay in durance, and says that this gentleman imposed needless suffering upon his unhappy charges, not because of any inherent cruelty or contravention of the rules for prison discipline, but because he was entirely lacking in imagination.

On one occasion, during the hour allowed for exercise, a prisoner who walked behind Wilde upon the circular pathway of the yard addressed him by name, and told him that he pitied him even more than he pitied himself, because his sufferings must be greater than his. Such a sudden word of sympathy from an unknown fellow-convict gave the poor poet an exquisite moment of pleasure and pain. He answered him appropriately with a word of thanks. But one of the warders had been a witness of the occasion, and the matter was reported to the Governor. Two convicts had been guilty of the outrage of

exchanging a few words. The unknown convict was taken first before the Governor. It is a prison regulation that the punishment is not the same for the man who speaks first and the man who answers him. The first offender has to pay a double penalty. The Convict X., when before the Governor, stated that he was the culprit and that he had spoken first. When afterwards Wilde was taken before the martinet, he very naturally told him that he himself was the principal offender. The Governor stated that he was unable to understand the matter at all. He grew red and uneasy, and told Wilde that he had already given X. fifteen days' solitary confinement. He then stated that as Wilde had also confessed to be the principal offender he should award him fifteen days' solitary confinement also !

This touching incident shows both Wilde and the unknown convict in a noble light, but the gentle way in which Oscar told of the incident to the French journalist is even a greater tribute to the innate dignity of his character, so long obscured by the exigencies of his life, so beautifully laid bare when he had paid his debt to society.

There are other anecdotes extant which confirm the above. All go to show that the third period brought out the finest traits in Wilde's character. We have in this period another and

most touching side of the complex temperament of this great genius, this extraordinary and unhappy man. Much will have to be said on this point when the criticism of "De Profundis" is reached.

Meanwhile, I close the "third period" with a sense that here, at anyrate, there is nothing to be said which is not wholly fragrant and redolent of sincerity.

THE FOURTH PERIOD

It is with a sense of both reluctance and relief that I enter upon a short account of the fourth period, insomuch as this or that incident during it throws a light upon the character of him of whom we speak.

With a relief, because it is a far happier and more gracious task to endeavour to criticise and appreciate the literary works of a great genius than it is to chronicle facts in the life of a most unhappy man which may help to elucidate the puzzle of his personality.

With reluctance, because the fourth period is again one of almost unadulterated gloom and sadness. I shall be as brief as possible, and too much already has been written about the last days of Oscar Wilde after his release from prison.

A considerable amount of information has

been placed at my disposal, but I design to use none of it. The facts that are already known to those who have taken an interest in Oscar Wilde may be briefly touched upon here, and that is all. An eloquent plea from a near relation of the poet should be respected here, and only such few facts as are really necessary to complete this incomplete study shall be given. "Nothing could have horrified him more than that men calling themselves his friends should publish concerning his latter days details so disgusting as those appearing in your issue of yesterday." Thus a paragraph from the appeal I have mentioned, an appeal which was prompted by the publication of many controversial articles as to the truth, or otherwise, of Mr Wilde's reception into the Roman Church, his debts, his manner of living towards the end. "I should be glad to think that this expression of my wish may put an end to this unpleasant correspondence. If it does not, I can only appeal to your correspondents to be very careful of what they write, and to reflect upon what Mr Oscar Wilde would think if he could read their letters. In life, he never said or countenanced a coarse or common thing. Personally, I write with too much reluctance to reply to them again, and I leave the matter to their sense of decency and chivalry."

Immediately upon his release from prison

Oscar Wilde wrote his famous letters to *The Daily Chronicle* on "Children in Prison and Other Cruelties of Life in Gaol." He told a terrible story of a poor little child whose face was "like a white wedge of sheer terror," and in his eyes "the mute appeal of a hunted animal." Wilde had heard the poor little fellow at breakfast-time crying and calling to be let out. He was calling for his parents, and every now and then the elder prisoner could hear the harsh voice of the warder on duty telling the little boy to be quiet. The child had not been convicted of the offence with which he was charged, but was simply on remand. A kind-hearted warder, finding the little fellow crying with hunger and utterly unable to eat the bread and water given it for breakfast, brought it some sweet biscuits. This, Mr Wilde truthfully said, was a "beautiful action on the warder's part." The child, grateful for the man's kindness, told one of the senior warders about it. The result was that the warder who had brought the biscuits to the starving child was reported and dismissed from the service.

It is not too much to say that this story, told in the prose of a master of prose, written with a crushing and sledgehammer force all the more powerful because it was most marvellously simple, thrilled the whole of England. There followed an even more terrible story.

Three months or so before his release, Wilde had noticed, among the prisoners who took exercise with him, a young prisoner who was obviously either half-witted or trembling upon the verge of insanity. This poor creature used to gesticulate, laugh and talk to himself. "At chapel he used to sit right under the observation of two warders, who carefully watched him all the time. Sometimes he would bury his head in his hands, an offence against the chapel regulations, and his head would be immediately struck up by a warder. . . . He was on more than one occasion sent out of chapel to his cell, and of course he was continually punished. . . . I saw that he was becoming insane and was being treated as if he were shamming." There was a terrible denouement to this hideous story. Mr Wilde went on to say in words that do him eternal credit and which no one who has read them could ever forget :

"On Saturday week last, I was in my cell at about one o'clock occupied in cleaning and polishing the tins I had been using for dinner. Suddenly I was startled by the prison silence being broken by the most horrible and revolting shrieks, or rather howls, for at first I thought some animal like a bull or a cow was being unskilfully slaughtered outside the prison walls. I soon realised, however, that the howls proceeded from the basement of the prison, and I knew

that some wretched man was being flogged. I need not say how hideous and terrible it was for me, and I began to wonder who it was being punished in this revolting manner. Suddenly it dawned upon me that they might be flogging this unfortunate lunatic. My feelings on the subject need not be chronicled; they have nothing to do with the question.

“The next day, Sunday, I saw the poor fellow at exercise, his weak, ugly, wretched face bloated by tears and hysteria almost beyond recognition. He walked in the centre ring along with the old men, the beggars and the lame people, so that I was able to observe him the whole time. It was my last Sunday in prison, a perfectly lovely day, the finest day we had had the whole year, and there, in the beautiful sunlight, walked this poor creature—made once in the image of God—grinning like an ape, and making with his hands the most fantastic gestures.”

The story continued with even more terrible details than these. It is no part of my plan to harrow the feelings of my readers by a reprint of such horrors. I have said enough, I trust, to fulfil my purpose in quoting Oscar Wilde's letters to all—to show how powerfully he himself was moved with pity, and how he strove, even in his own terrible re-entrance to a world which would have none of him, to influence public opinion on the behalf of one who was

being done to death, not perhaps by conscious cruelty, but by the awful stupidity of those who live by an inflexible rule which can make no allowance for special circumstances, which is as hard as the nether millstone and as cold as death itself.

So Oscar Wilde passed out of England with pity flowing from his pen and with pity in his heart. I wish that it was possible to end this memoir here. As I have set out to give all the facts which seem necessary to provide a complete picture for readers who know little or nothing of Oscar Wilde's nature, beyond the fact of his triumphs as a playwright and his subsequent disgrace, I must not shrink from proceeding to the end, as I have not shrunk from frankly recording facts in the first and second periods. It would be a fault, and insincere, to allow a deep and very natural sympathy to interfere with the performance, however inadequately it has been carried out, of the task I set out to complete.

Oscar Wilde crossed immediately to Dieppe, and shortly afterwards installed himself in a villa at a small seaside place some miles away from the gay Norman bathing place. His life at Berneval was simple and happy. His biographer, Mr Robert Harborough Sherard, who visited him there, has told of the quiet repose and healing days which Oscar Wilde enjoyed. He had

a sufficient sum of money to live in comfort for a year or so, and all would doubtless have gone well with him had it not been for certain malign influences which had already been prominent factors in wrecking his life, and which now appeared again to menace his newly found salvation of mind and spirit. Such references are not within the province of the book, the story has been told elsewhere. The thing would not have been referred to at all, did it not illustrate the impatience and weakness of Wilde's character, even at this point in his history. The malign influences eventually had their way with the poet—that is to say, certain companions whom it was most unwise of him to see or recognise, once more entered into his life in a certain degree.

A letter which was written to a gentleman who has translated a French memoir dealing with the poet, says: "No more beautiful life has any man lived, no more beautiful life could any man live than Oscar Wilde lived during the short period I knew him in prison. He wore upon his face an eternal smile; sunshine was on his face, sunshine of some sort must have been in his heart. People say he was not sincere: he was the very soul of sincerity when I knew him. If he did not continue that life after he left prison, then the forces of evil must have been too strong for him. But he tried, he honestly

tried, and in prison he succeeded." The forces of evil were too strong.

Oscar Wilde spent the last few years, and alas! miserable years, of his life in alternations of sordid poverty and sudden waves of temporary prosperity, in the city of Paris. There have been all sorts of stories about these last few years. The truth is simply this. Wilde's intellect was crushed and broken. The creative faculty flamed up for the last time in that brilliant and terrible poem, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol." Then it sank again and was never revived. When I say "creative faculty" I mean the faculty of producing a sustained artistic effort. As a talker the poet was never more brilliant. "Every now and again one or other of the very few faithful English friends left to him would turn up in Paris and take him to dinner at one of the best restaurants, and anyone who met him on these occasions would have found it difficult to believe that he had ever passed through such awful experiences. Whether he was expounding some theory, grave or fantastic, embroidering it the while with flashes of impromptu wit, or deepening it with extraordinary intimate learning, or whether he was keeping the table in a roar with his delightfully whimsical humour, a summer lightning that flashed and hurt no one, he was equally admirable. To have lived in his lifetime and not to have heard him talk is as though

one had lived at Athens without going to look at the Parthenon."

I think we should be glad to know that in the wrecked life of this period the poet had some happy moments when he could reconstruct in bright and brilliant surroundings some slight renewal of other days that were gone for ever. There is no doubt at all that friends, both those who had had a good and those who had had a bad influence on his past life, were very kind to him.

He was supplied with enough money to have lived in considerable comfort had he not been incurably reckless and a spendthrift. It has been said that he died in wretched poverty and in debt. This is partly true, but it was entirely his own fault. There is indubitable proof of the fairly large sums he received from time to time. Some of his letters to a man in London, who occasionally employed his pen, have been sold to the curious, and such poignant passages as: "I rely on your sending me a little money to-morrow. I have only succeeded in getting twenty francs from the Concierge, and I am in a bad way," or, "I wish to goodness you could come over, also—send me, if you can, £4 or even £3. I am now trying to leave my hotel and get rooms where I can be at rest, and so stay in during the morning."

These letters seem to show that Oscar Wilde

was nearly starving. I can assure my readers this was not the case. With the realisation that there would never be any more place for him in the world had come a carelessness and recklessness to all but immediate and petty sensual gratifications from day to day.

His landlord stated that towards the end it became very difficult for Wilde to write at all. "He used to whip himself up with cognac. A litre bottle would hardly see him through the night. And he ate little. And he took little exercise. He used to sleep till noon, and then breakfast, and then sleep again till five or six in the evening."

This is enough. I have said as little as can well be said. But let us remember the frightful and crushing disabilities under which Wilde suffered. Who is there who dare cast a stone? His death came as a happy release, and it was sordid and dreadful enough to complete the grim tragedy of his life without deviation from its completeness. True, an attached friend was by him at the end. True, the offices of the Holy Catholic Church lightened his passing. Yet, nevertheless, there was an abiding and sinister gloom about all his last hours. Details can be found in other places. "How Oscar Wilde died" was a journalistic sensation at the time.

I will simply quote the words of a French

critic, who, after the end, went to pay his last sad duties to the shell which had held the poet's soul: ". . . The hotel in which he died was one of those horrible places which are called in the popular papers 'Houses of Crime.' A veritable Hercules of a porter led me through a long, evil-smelling corridor. At last the odour of some disinfectant struck my nostrils. An open door. A little square room. I stood before the corpse. His whitish, emaciated face, strangely altered through the growth of a beard after death, seemed to be lost in profound contemplation. A hand, cramped in agony, still clutched the dirty bed cloth. There was no one to watch by his body. Only much later they sent him some flowers. The noise of the street pierced the thin walls of the building. A stale odour filled the air. Ah, what loneliness, what an end!"

If I have quoted this ugly and vulgar picture of the poet's body in the sordid room I have done so with intention.

It is in the contemplation of such scenes as this that our minds and hearts are uplifted from the material to the supreme hope of all of us. The man who had suffered and sinned and done noble things in this world had gone away from it. Doubtless, when the Frenchman with his prying eyes and notebook was gloating over the material sensation of the scene, the soul of the poet was hearing harmonies too long unknown

to it, and was beginning to undergo the Purification.

Requiescat.

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Oscar Wilde was always a loving student of Dante. In that contempt for the world's opinion, which is sometimes the strength and also the ruin of great geniuses, Wilde bore a strong resemblance to the great Italian who said "Lascia dir le genti." The versatility of Oscar Wilde was supreme, and that is in itself the real solution of whatever is most astonishing in his power or startling in his madness, of all that most draws us towards him or repels us with an equal strength. "A variety of powers almost boundless, a pride not less vast in displaying them—a susceptibility of new impressions and impulses, even beyond the usual allotment of genius . . . such were the two great and leading sources of all that varied spectacle which his life exhibited; and that succession of victories achieved by his genius, in almost every field of mind that genius ever trod, and of all those sallies of character in every shape and direction that unchecked feeling and dominant self-will can dictate."

It is not for the author of this memoir, whose attitude has been studiously impersonal throughout, to attempt any dictation to his readers as to the judgment they shall ultimately form upon the character of Oscar Wilde.

At the same time, he hopes that it may not be forbidden him to give his own, and doubtless very imperfect, view. He thinks that in regarding the whole field of the poet's life, as far as it can be known to others, one finds him to be a sweet and noble nature with much of the serenity of "highness" which accompanies a great genius, yet, obscured, soiled, overlapped, and periodically destroyed by a terrible and riotous madness, both of talk and of thought. It is a facile and dangerous thing to attribute all the good and noble actions of any man to his "real self," and to say that all the evil he wrought and did came from madness or irresponsibility. If such a doctrine were to be generally accepted and believed, laws would lose their *raison d'être*, punishment would become a mockery, and society would inevitably end.

Yet, possibly it may be that some few souls exist and have existed of whom such a statement may be true. If such exceptions do exist and have existed, then surely Oscar Wilde was one of them. There seems to be no other explanation of him but just this; and if we do not accept it I, at anyrate, cannot see any other.

Let each reader of this book appropriate his own, and I conclude the first part of it by repeating the old, old prayer—

Requiescat.



PART II

THE MODERN PLAYWRIGHT

THE DRAMATIST

WHEN Mr George Alexander produced "Lady Windermere's Fan" at the St James's Theatre, in the spring of 1892, it created an unprecedented furore among all ranks of the playgoing public, and placed the author at once upon a pedestal in the Valhalla of the Drama; not on account of the plot, which was frankly somewhat *vieux jeu*, nor yet upon any striking originality in the types of the personages who were to unravel it, but upon the sparkle of the dialogue, the brilliancy of the epigrams, a condition of things to which the English stage had hitherto been entirely unaccustomed. The author was acclaimed as a playwright who had at last succeeded in clothing stagecraft with the vesture of literature, and with happy phrase and nimble paradox delighted the minds of his audience. What promise of a long succession of social comedies, illuminated by the intimate knowledge of his subject that he so entirely possessed, was held out to us! Here was a man who treated society as it really exists; who was himself living in it; portraying its folk as he knew them, with their virtues and vices coming to them as naturally as the facile flow of their conversation;

conversation interlarded with no stilted sentences, no well- (or ill-) rounded periods, but such as that which falls without conscious effort from the lips of people who, in whatever surroundings they may be placed, are, before all things, and at all times, thoroughly at their ease. It may be objected that people in real life, even in the higher life of the Upper Ten, do not habitually scatter sprightly pleasantries abroad as they sit around the five-o'clock tea-table. That Oscar Wilde made every personage he depicted talk as he himself was wont to talk. *Passe encore*. The real fact remains that he *knew* the social atmosphere he represented, had breathed it, and was familiar with all its traditions and mannerisms. He gave us the *tone* of Society as it had never before been given. He was at home in it. He could exhibit a ball upon the stage where real ladies and gentlemen assembled together, quite distinct from the ancient "Adelphi guests" who had hitherto done yeoman's service in every form of entertainment imagined by the dramatist. The company who came to his great parties were at least *vraisemblables*, beings who conducted themselves as if they really might have been there. And so it was in every scene, in every situation. His types are drawn with the pen of knowledge, dipped in the ink of experience. That was his secret, the keynote of his success. And with what power he used it the world is now fully

aware. It is not too much to say that Oscar Wilde revolutionised dramatic art. Henceforth it began to be understood that the playwright who would obtain the merit of a certain plausibility must endeavour to infuse something of the breath of life into his creations, and make them act and talk in a manner that was at least possible.

It has been a popular *pose* among certain superior persons, equally devoid of humour themselves as of the power of appreciating it in others, that Oscar Wilde sacrificed dramatic action to dialogue; that his plays were lacking in human interest, his plots of the very poorest; a fact that was skilfully concealed by the sallies of smart sayings and witty repartee, which carried the hearers away during the representation, so that in the charm of the style they forgot the absence of the substance. But such is by no means the case. The author recognised, with his fine artistic *flair*, that mere talk, however admirable, will not carry a play to a successful issue without a strong underlying stratum of histrionic interest to support it. There are situations in his comedies as powerful in their handling as could be desired by the most devout stickler for dramatic intention. There are scenes in which the humorist lays aside his motley, and becomes the moralist, unsparing in his methods to enforce, *à l'outrance*, the significance

of his text. In each of his plays there are moments in which the action is followed by the spectator with absorbed attention ; incidents of emotional value treated in no half-hearted fashion. Such are the hall mark of the true dramatist who can touch, with the unerring instinct of the poet, the finest feelings, the deepest sympathies of his audience, and which place Oscar Wilde by the side of Victorien Sardou. As has been well written by one of our most impartial critics : “No other among our playwrights equals this distinguished Frenchman, either in imagination or in poignancy of style.”

Again, it has been contended, with a sneer, that the turning out of witty speeches is but a trick, easy of imitation by any theatrical scribe who sets himself to the task. But how many of Wilde’s imitators—and there have been not a few — have accomplished such command of language, such literary charm, such “fineness” of wit ? Who among them all has ever managed to hold an audience spellbound in the same way ? How many have succeeded in drawing from a miscellaneous crowd of spectators such spontaneous expressions of delighted approval as “How brilliant ! How true !” first muttered by each under the breath to himself, and then tossed loudly from one to the other in pure enjoyment, as the solid truth, underlying the varnish of the paradox, was borne home to them ?

Surely, not one can be indicated. Nor is the reason far to seek. For in all Oscar Wilde's seemingly irresponsible witticisms it is not only the device of the inverted epigram that is made a characteristic feature of the dialogue; there is real human nature behind the artificialities, there is poetry beneath the prose, the grip of the master's hand in seemingly toying with truth. And it is the possession of these innate qualities that differentiates the inventor from his imitators, and leaves them hopelessly behind in the race for dramatic distinction.

To invent anything is difficult, and in proportion to its merits praiseworthy. To cavil at that which has been devised, to point with the finger of scorn at its imperfections, to "run it down," is only too easy a pastime. Oscar Wilde was before all an inventor. Whatever he touched he endowed with the gracious gift of style that bore the stamp of his own individual genius. He originated a new treatment for ancient themes. For there is no such thing as an absolutely new "plot." Every play that has been written is founded on doings, dealings, incidents that have happened over and over again. Love, licit or illicit, the mainspring of all drama, is the same to-day as it was yesterday, and will be for ever and ever in this world. One man and one woman, or one woman and two men, or again, as a pleasant variant, two women and one man.

Such are the eternal puppets that play the game of Love upon the Stage of Life ; the unconscious victims of the sentiment which sometimes makes for tragedy. They are always with us, placed in the same situations, and extricating themselves (or otherwise) in the same old way. So that when a new playwright is condemned by the critics as a furbisher-up of well-known *clichés* he is hardly treated. He cannot help himself. He must tread the familiar paths, *faute de mieux*. And the public, with its big human heart and unquestioning traditions, knows this, and is satisfied therewith. Nothing really pleases people so much as to tell them something they already know. What an accomplished dramatist can do is to rehabilitate his characters by the power of his own personality, and by felicitous treatment invest his action with fresh interest. And this is what Oscar Wilde effected in stagecraft. He vitalised it.

It is well-nigh impossible, under the existing conditions of the theatre in England, to form any just appreciation of the dramatist's work at all. A novel may be read at any time, but a play depends on the caprice of a manager to "present" it or not, as suits his commercial convenience. Happily for us the comedies of Oscar Wilde are printed and published, and can be enjoyed equally in the study as in the stalls. We must go back to Congreve and Sheridan to

find a parallel. It is the triumph of the *littérateur* over the histrionic hack, the man whose volumes are taken down from the shelves where they repose, again and again, and require no adventitious aid of scenery and costume to enhance the pleasure they afford. Albeit that the habit of reading plays is not particularly an English one. The old Puritan feeling that all things theatrical were tainted with more or less immorality still clings to many a mind. Emotion is yet looked upon with suspicion, and as the theatre is the hotbed of emotion it is even now regarded in some quarters as a dangerous, if exciting, pleasure-ground. Sober-minded folk prefer rather to take their doses of love tales in the form of the novel, however inexpert, than in that of the play, however masterly it may be. Let an author put to the vote his appeal to his public through their eyes or their ears, it will be found that the eyes have it. They prefer to stop at home and read, as they consider, seriously, than to go abroad and listen to what they hold to be, trivialities. Oscar Wilde has, in great measure, been instrumental in putting these illiberal views to flight. Men and women are now to be found in the theatre when his pieces are represented who not so long ago pooh-poohed the drama from an intelligent standpoint. He has turned attention to the fact that the dramatic method of telling a story may be made as intellectually

interesting as in the best-written romances of the novelist. He brought to bear upon his work a singular power of observation, a fine imagination, a unique wit, and above all, and beneath all, an extensive knowledge of human life, and human character. Plays imbued with all these qualities were bound to make their mark. He knocked away the absurd conventions, the stereotyped phrases of the stage as he knew it. He placed on it living people in the place of mechanical puppets, and by his happy inspiration created a new order in the profession of dramaturgy.

It would be an interesting subject for speculation—were it not such a deeply sad one—how far Oscar Wilde, had he been permitted to live, would have gone in the new *voie* he had chosen for the expression of his artistic perceptions. Between “Lady Windermere’s Fan” and “The Importance Of Being Earnest,” the first and last of his comedies, there is evidence of very marked and rapid advancement in his art. In the former he shows us the invention of a hitherto unhandseled form of histrionic composition—the dialogue-drama. But he is feeling his way in this new departure of his, diffident of its success; while in the latter he has perfected what was more or less crude, incomplete, found wanting, and what was originally the natural hesitation of the novice has developed into the assured pro-

nouncements of the adept. He was moving onwards. He was making theatrical history. He was becoming a power. And we who now read, mark, learn, be it on the stage or in the study, what he achieved in the production of but four modern comedies, can only premise that to-day he would have "arrived" at the meridian of his art. For, not in vain, was born the delicate wit that played around a philosophy of life, founded upon subtle observation, and one that has animated some of the most prominent literary and dramatic productions of our generation. Not in vain was struck that note of truth and sincerity in social ethics, unheard in the *ad captandum* strains of our professional novelists. Underlying those "phraseological inversions," so daintily cooed by the dove, was the wisdom of the serpent. It is the spirit of the poet speaking through the medium of prose. It is the utterance of the great artist that must compel attention even from the Philistines who sit in the seats of the scornful.

“LADY WINDERMERE’S FAN”

*(Produced by Mr George Alexander at the St James’s Theatre
on 22nd February 1892)*

I HAVE endeavoured to indicate, I trust more or less successfully, the manner in which an enthusiastic public received the first of Oscar Wilde’s comedies. Let us now glance at the attitude affected by the critics. It is not too much to say that it was of undoubted hostility. Their verdict was decidedly an inimical one. They had received an unexpected shock, and were staggering under it in an angry, helpless way. The new dramatist was a surprise, and an unpleasant one. He had in one evening destroyed the comfortable conventions of the stage, hitherto so dear to the critic’s heart. He had dared to break down the barriers of ancient prejudice, and attempt something new, something original. In a word, he had dared to be himself, the most heinous offence of all! They could not entirely ignore his undeniable talent. Public opinion was on his side. So they dragged in side issues to point *their* little moral, and adorn *their* little tale. This is how Mr Clement Scott writes after the first performance of “Lady Windermere’s Fan”:

“Supposing, after all, Mr Oscar Wilde is

a cynic of deeper significance than we take him to be. Supposing he intends to reform and revolutionise Society at large by sublime self-sacrifice. There are two sides to every question, and Mr Oscar Wilde's piety in social reform has not as yet been urged by anybody. His attitude has been so extraordinary that I am inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt. It is possible he may have said to himself, 'I will show you, and prove to you, to what an extent bad manners are not only recognised, but endorsed in this wholly free and unrestricted age. I will do on the stage of a public theatre what I should not dare to do at a mass meeting in the Park. I will uncover my head in the presence of refined women, but I refuse to put down my cigarette. The working man may put out his pipe when he spouts, but my cigarette is too 'precious' for destruction. I will show no humility, and I will stand unrebuked. I will take greater liberties with the public than any author who has ever preceded me in history. And I will retire scatheless. The society that allows boys to puff cigarette smoke in the faces of ladies in the theatre corridors will condone the originality of a smoking author on the stage.' This may be the form of Mr Oscar Wilde's curious cynicism. He may say, 'I will test this question of manners, and show that they are not nowadays recognised.'"

So far Mr Clement Scott, then the leader of the critic band who took his tone and cheerfully followed where he led—the old story of “*Les brebis de Pannège*.” And to show how universal was this inordinate enmity, I will quote a paragraph from, at that time, the leading journal of historical criticism, written on the withdrawal of the play after a successful “run” of nine months. After endorsing the general opinion of the play as “A comedy of Society manners pure and simple which may fairly claim its place among the recognised names in that almost extinct class of drama,” the writer goes on to say in the conclusion of his article—“Not the least amusing reminiscence will be the ferocious wrath which, on its first appearance, the play provoked among the regular stage-critics, almost to a man. Except that Mr Wilde smoked a cigarette when called on, it is difficult to see why—unless it was because the comedy ran off the beaten track which is just what they are always deprecating.” In this last sentence lies the *clou* of the whole situation. The entire band had been clamouring for years for something fresh, “off the beaten track,” and this is how they received it when they got it! Verily, the ways of criticism are indeed marvellous, and difficult of comprehension. But the author triumphed over them all and won his laurels despite the forces arrayed

against him. His first comedy was a splendid success.

It must be conceded that there is nothing new in the plot of "Lady Windermere's Fan." It is an old tale of intrigue which has done duty on the stage over and over again. It has inspired many a play. But as I before observed, it is in its treatment by the accomplished hand that the novelty of drama lies. And here we have an interesting example of how old lamps may be made to look new at the touch of the magician's wand.

Lord and Lady Windermere have been married for a couple of years when the action of the play commences. It was a love-match, and the sky of happiness has hitherto been without a cloud. But the cloud at last appears in the guise of a certain Mrs Erlynne, a somewhat notorious *divorcée*, who has managed to gain admission into Society, in a half-acknowledged way, by means of her charms and her cash. The cash is supplied by Lord Windermere, and is in the nature of hush-money. For Mrs Erlynne turns out to be no other than Lady Windermere's mother, supposed to be long dead, and the "cloud" might prove an uncommonly inconvenient one if allowed suddenly to burst upon the unsuspecting *ménage*. So she is kept quiet by the cheques of her son-in-law. But her friends are not backward in enlightening Lady

Windermere as to her husband's frequent visits to Mrs Erlynne, and one of them, the Duchess of Berwick, is more outspoken than the others, and succeeds in persuading poor innocent-minded Lady Windermere that the worst constructions should be placed upon his lordship's conduct. Mrs Erlynne has managed to induce Lord Windermere to send her a card for his wife's birthday ball, whereat, Lady Windermere, when she hears of this from her husband's lips, declares she will insult the guest openly if she arrives. But she does arrive and she is not insulted, although the celebrated fan is grasped ready to strike the blow! The ball passes off quietly enough, without any open scandal. But Lady Windermere, surprising, as she imagines, her husband in a compromising *tête-à-tête* with the fascinating intruder, determines in a moment of nervous tension to leave the house, and betake herself to the rooms of Lord Darlington, who earlier in the evening has offered her his sympathy, and his heart. Before she departs, however, she writes her husband a letter informing him of her intentions. This letter she leaves on a bureau where he is sure to find it. It is not he who finds it, however, but Mrs Erlynne. With the instinct born of a past and vast experience she scents danger, and opens and reads it. Then her better feelings and worse heart are suddenly awakened, and she determines, at

all risks, to save her daughter. Whereupon she follows her to Lord Darlington's rooms, and, after a long scene between the two women, induces Lady Windermere to return to her husband before her flight is discovered. But it is too late. Lord Darlington, with a party of friends including Lord Windermere, is returning. Their voices are heard outside the door. Lady Windermere hides behind a curtain ready to escape on the first opportunity, while Mrs Erlynne—when Lord Windermere's suspicions are aroused at the sight of his wife's fan, and he insists on searching the room—comes forth from the place where she had concealed herself, and boldly takes upon herself the ownership of the fatal *pièce à conviction*. Lady Windermere is saved, and at the end of the play is reconciled to her husband without uncomfortable explanations, while Mrs Erlynne marries an elderly adorer, who is brother to the Duchess of Berwick.

Such, in brief, is the plot of "Lady Windermere's Fan." Every playgoer will at once recognise its situations, and hail its intrigue as an old and well-tried friend; the loving husband and wife, the fascinating adventuress who comes between them and cannot be explained; the tempter who offers substantial consolation to the outraged wife; the compromising fan, or scarf, or glove (*selon les goûts*) found by the husband in the room of the other man; the

convenient curtain closely drawn as if to invite concealment; the hairbreadth escape of the wife leaving the *onus* of the scandal to fall upon the shoulders of some self-sacrificing friend; the final reconciliation of husband and wife without any infelicitous catechism; are not these things written in the pages of all the plays that—as George Meredith so happily puts it—“deal with human nature in the drawing-rooms of civilised men and women.” With certain variations they are the mainstay—the French word is *l’armature*—of every comedy of genteel passions and misunderstandings that ever existed. Now, how does Oscar Wilde contrive to clothe this dramatic skeleton with the flesh and blood of real life? How invest the familiar figures with the plausible presentment of new-born interest? Simply by the wonderful power of his personality, which dominates all he touches, and rejuvenates the venerable bones of his *dramatis personæ*, compelling them, after the fashion of the “Pied Piper,” to dance to any tune he chooses to call. Or, perhaps, “sing” would be a better expression than “dance.” For it is in what they say, rather than what they do, that our chief interest in them lies. We do not ask: “What are they going to do next?” That is more or less a forgone conclusion. But what we wait for with alert attention is what they are going to say next. And so we come back to that brilliant dialogue which

is, as it should be, the chief feature of the play albeit that play is as well constructed as any could desire, straightforward and convincing. As a critic once wrote of it from the craftsman's point of view: " ' Lady Windermere's Fan ' as a specimen of true comedy is a head and shoulders above any of its contemporaries. It has nothing in common with farcical comedy, with didactic comedy, or the ' literary ' comedy of which we have heard so much of late from disappointed authors, whose principal claim to literature appears to consist in being undramatic. It is a distinguishing note of Mr Wilde that he has condescended to learn his business, and has written a workmanlike play as well as a good comedy. Without that it would be worthless." In corroboration of this statement it is only necessary to note how skilfully, when it comes to the necessity of dramatic action, these scenes are handled. Take the one in the second act, where Mrs Erlynne, more or less, forces her way into Lady Windermere's ballroom. It is an episode of extreme importance, and how well led up to ! Lord and Lady Windermere are on the stage together.

Lord Windermere. Margaret, I *must* speak to you.

Lady Windermere. Will you hold my fan for me, Lord Darlington ? Thanks. (*Comes down to him.*)

Lord Windermere. (*Crossing to her.*) Margaret, what you said before dinner was, of course, impossible?

Lady Windermere. That woman is not coming here to-night!

Lord Windermere. (*R.C.*) Mrs Erlynne is coming here, and if you in any way annoy or wound her, you will bring shame and sorrow on us both. Remember that! Ah, Margaret! only trust me! A wife should trust her husband.

Lady Windermere. London is full of women who trust their husbands. One can always recognise them. They look so thoroughly unhappy. I am not going to be one of them. (*Moves up.*) Lord Darlington, will you give me back my fan, please? Thanks. . . . A useful thing a fan, isn't it? . . . I want a friend to-night, Lord Darlington. I didn't know I would want one soon.

Lord Darlington. Lady Windermere! I knew the time would come some day: but why to-night?

Lord Windermere. I *will* tell her. I must. It would be terrible if there were any scene. Margaret. . .

Parker (*announcing*). Mrs Erlynne.

(*Lord Windermere starts. Mrs Erlynne enters, very beautifully dressed and very dignified. Lady Windermere clutches at her fan, then lets it drop on the floor. She bows coldly*

to Mrs Erlynne, who bows to her sweetly in turn, and sails into the room.)

If this is not effective stagecraft, I do not know what is. And the dramatist strikes a deeper, and more tragic, note in the scene later on (in the same act) where Mrs Erlynne discovers the letter of farewell that Lady Windermere had written to her husband.

(Parker enters, and crosses towards the ballroom, R. Enter Mrs Erlynne.)

Mrs Erlynne. Is Lady Windermere in the ballroom?

Parker. Her ladyship has just gone out.

Mrs Erlynne. Gone out? She's not on the terrace?

Parker. No, madam. Her Ladyship has just gone out of the house.

Mrs Erlynne (*Starts and looks at the servant with a puzzled expression on her face*). Out of the house?

Parker. Yes, madam—her Ladyship told me she had left a letter for his Lordship on the table.

Mrs Erlynne. A letter for Lord Windermere?

Parker. Yes, madam.

Mrs Erlynne. Thank you.

(Exit Parker. The music in the ballroom stops.)

Gone out of her house! A letter addressed to her husband!

(Goes over to bureau and looks at letter. Takes it up and lays it down again with a shudder of fear.)

No, no! it would be impossible! Life doesn't repeat its tragedies like that! Oh, why does this horrible fancy come across me? Why do I remember now the one moment of my life I most wish to forget? Does life repeat its tragedies?

(Tears letter open and reads it, then sinks down into a chair with a gesture of anguish.)

Oh, how terrible! the same words that twenty years ago I wrote to her father! And how bitterly I have been punished for it! No; my punishment, my real punishment is to-night, is now!

I have quoted these two episodes from the second act to demonstrate how equal was the playwright to the exigencies of his art. But it is in the third act, laid in Lord Darlington's rooms, that he reaches the level of high dramatic skill. First, in the scene between the mother and daughter, written with extraordinary power and pathos, and later on, when each of the women are hidden, the "man's scene" which ranks with the famous club scene in Lord Lytton's "Money." *The blasé* and genial tone

of these men of the world is admirably caught. Their conversation sparkles with wit and wisdom—of the world *bien entendu*. But it is in Mrs Erlynne's appeal to her daughter, with all its tragic intent that the author surpasses himself. Just read it over. It is a masterpiece of restrained emotion.

Mrs Erlynne. (Starts with a gesture of pain. Then restrains herself, and comes over to where Lady Windermere is sitting. As she speaks, she stretches out her hands towards her, but does not dare to touch her.) Believe what you choose about me. I am not without a moment's sorrow. But don't spoil your beautiful young life on my account. You don't know what may be in store for you, unless you leave this house at once. You don't know what it is to fall into the pit, to be despised, mocked, abandoned, sneered at—to be an outcast! to find the door shut against one, to have to creep in by hideous byways, afraid every moment lest the mask should be stripped from one's face, and all the while to hear the laughter of the world, a thing more tragic than all the tears the world has ever shed. You don't know what it is. One pays for one's sin, and then one pays again, and all one's life one pays. You must never know that. As for me, if suffering be an expiation, then at this moment I have expiated all my faults, whatever they have

been ; for to-night you have made a heart in one who had it not, made it and broken it. But let that pass. I may have wrecked my own life, but I will not let you wreck yours. You—why you are a mere girl, you would be lost. You haven't got the kind of brains that enables a woman to get back. You have neither the wit nor the courage. You couldn't stand dishonour. No ! go back, Lady Windermere, to the husband who loves you, whom you love. You have a child, Lady Windermere. Go back to that child who even now, in pain or in joy, may be calling to you. (*Lady Windermere rises.*) God gave you that child. He will require from you that you make his life fine, that you watch over him. What answer will you make to God, if his life is ruined through you ? Back to your house, Lady Windermere — your husband loves you. He has never swerved for a moment from the love he bears you. But even if he had a thousand loves, you must stay with your child. If he was harsh to you, you must stay with your child. If he ill-treated you, you must stay with your child. If he abandoned you your place is with your child.

(*Lady Windermere bursts into tears and buries her face in her hands.*)

(*Rushing to her.*) Lady Windermere !

Lady Windermere (holding out her hands to her, helplessly, as a child might do). Take me home. Take me home.

Few people who witnessed that situation could have done so without being deeply moved. It is Oscar Wilde the poet who speaks, not to the brain but to the heart.

Then turn from the shadow of that scene to the shimmer of the one that follows immediately, full of smartness and *jeu d'esprit*. The sprightly and irresponsible chatter of men of the world.

Dumby. Awfully commercial, women nowadays. Our grandmothers threw their caps over the mill, of course, but, by Jove, their granddaughters only throw their caps over mills that can raise the wind for them.

Lord Augustus. You want to make her out a wicked woman. She is not!

Cecil Graham. Oh! wicked women bother one. Good women bore one. That is the only difference between them.

Dumby. In this world there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it. The last is much the worst, the last is a real tragedy.

Cecil Graham. What is a cynic?

Lord Darlington. A man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.

Cecil Graham. And a sentimentalist, my dear

Darlington, is a man who sees an absurd value in everything, and doesn't know the market price of any single thing.

Dumby. Experience is the name everyone gives to their mistakes.

Lord Windermere. What is the difference between scandal and gossip?

Cecil Graham. Oh! gossip is charming! History is merely gossip. But scandal is gossip made tedious by morality. Now I never moralise. A man who moralises is usually a hypocrite, and a woman who moralises is invariably plain. There is nothing in the whole world so unbecoming to a woman as a Nonconformist conscience. And most women know it, I'm glad to say.

And so we take our leave of "Lady Windermere's Fan."

“A WOMAN OF NO IMPORTANCE”

*(First produced at the Haymarket Theatre by Mr Beerbohm Tree
on 19th April 1903)*

PERHAPS of all Oscar Wilde's plays “The Woman Of No Importance” provoked the most discussion at the time of its production. It was his second venture in the histrionic field, and people expected much. They felt that he should now be finding his feet, that whatever shortcomings, from the point of view of stagecraft, there may have been in “Lady Windermere's Fan,” should now be made good. His first comedy was a well-constructed play of plot and incidents. But now, expectation rose high, and required of the author something better, something greater, something more considerable than what he had achieved before. How far were these expectations realised? How did the first-night audience of public, and critics, receive the new play? It must be confessed it was with a feeling akin to disappointment. People at first were undeniably disconcerted. They had come prepared to witness drama, possibly of stirring interest, and what they heard was dialogue of brilliant quality, indeed, but which, up to a certain point, had little to do in forwarding the action of the piece. It was a surprise, and, to

most of them, a not altogether grateful one. And it came in the first act. Here the author had actually been bold enough to defy popular traditions, and to place his characters seated in a semicircle uttering epigram after epigram, and paradox upon paradox, without any regard to whatever plot there might be; for it is not until the curtain is about to fall that we get an indication, for the first time, that something is going to happen in the next act. Here was an upset indeed! A subversion of all preconceived ideas as to how a play should begin! "Words! words!" they muttered captiously, although the words were as the pearls and diamonds that fell from the mouth of the maiden in the fairy tale. And so on, through scene after scene, until we come to the unexpected meeting of Lord Illingworth with the woman he had, long ago, betrayed and abandoned. Then quickly follows the pathetic interview between mother and son, culminating in Mrs Arbuthnot's confession that the man who would befriend her son is no other than his own father, to whom he should owe nothing, save the disgrace of his birth, leading up to the *scene-à-faire* in the final act, where Lord Illingworth's offer to make reparation to the woman he has wronged is acknowledged by a blow across the face. Here at last was drama, treated in the right spirit, and of an emotional value that cannot be too highly recognised.

But the shock of the earlier acts had been a severe one, and it took all the intense human interest of the last two acts to atone for the outraged conventions of the two first. It speaks volumes of praise for the playwright's powers that he was enabled to carry his work to a successful issue, and secure for it a long run. And not only that, but to stand the critical test of revival. For, at the moment of writing these words, Mr Tree has reproduced "The Woman Of No Importance" at His Majesty's Theatre, which is crowded, night after night, with audiences eager to bring a posthumous tribute to the genius of the author.

Apropos of the first act where all the *dramatis personæ* are seated in a semicircle engaged only in conversation, and which was likened, on the occasion of the first production of the play, by an eminent critic to "Christy Minstrelism Crystallised," it may not be uninteresting to note, *en passant*, a similar arrangement of characters in a play of Mr Bernard Shaw's recently performed at the Court Theatre. This is called "Don Juan in Hell"—the dream from "Man and Superman"—mercifully omitted when that play was produced. It had nothing whatever to do with the comedy in which it was included, but is a Niagara of ideas, clumsily put together, and is more or less an exposition of the Shawian philosophy.

"Hear the result"—I quote from the critique

in one of our leading journals—"The curtain rose at half-past two on a darkened stage draped in black. Enter, in turn, Don Juan, Dona Ana de Ulloa, the statue of her father, and the devil. They sat down, and for an hour and a half delivered those opinions of Mr Shaw with which we are all so terribly familiar. Every now and then there was a laugh, as, for example, when Don Juan said: 'Wherever ladies are is hell,' or, again, when he said: 'Have you ever had servants who were not devils?' It was all supposed to be very funny and very naughty, of course, especially when the statue said to Don Juan: 'If you dwelt in heaven, as I do, you would realise your advantages.' And so on, and so on, *ad nauseum*."

See now, how the parallel scene of "only talk" as written by Oscar Wilde was noticed upon its revival the other day. I quote from another journal. "Let all that can be urged against this play be granted. None the less is it worth watching the *dramatis personæ* do nothing, so long as the mind may be tickled by this unscrupulous, fastidious wit. And, even if all the characters speak in the same accents of paradox, their moods, the essentials of them, are differentiated with a brilliancy of expression which condones the lack of dramatic movement. These things, alone, evoke my gratitude to Mr Tree for reviving so interesting and individual a comedy. . . . For even those utterances which

seem to be mere phraseological inversions are fraught with much wisdom, and the major part of the dialogue reflects the mind of a subtle and daring social observer." And it was this "mind," keen of observation, and equipped with no ordinary wit, that dominates an audience and compels them to sit, as it were, spellbound before the demonstration of the power of its unique personality. I am informed that, to-day, in Germany, the only two modern English dramatists who are listened to are Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw—the poet and the proser. Truly may it be remarked: "*Les extrêmes se touchent.*"

The story of "The Woman Of No Importance" is quickly told.

Lord Illingworth, a cynical *roué*, has, in his youth, betrayed a too trusting young lady, who, in consequence, gave birth to a son, by her named Gerald. When the play begins this young fellow is nineteen years old, and has, most hopelessly it would seem, fallen in love with an American heiress whose name is Hester Worsley. He is living with his mother, called Mrs Arbuthnot, at a quiet country village, where also resides Lady Hunstanton, who acts as hostess to all the smart Society folk who appear upon the scene, and among whom Lord Illingworth is the most prominent. His lordship, ignorant of their real relationship, has taken a fancy to Gerald, and

offers him a private secretaryship. Whereupon his future prospects brighten up considerably. But when Mrs Arbuthnot discovers that Lord Illingworth is no other than the man who had wronged her, she does all in her power to persuade her (and his) son to refuse the offer, and, driven to extremity in her distress, tells Gerald her own history, as that of another woman. Her efforts are futile. The boy only says that the woman must have been as bad as the man, and that, as far as he can see, Lord Illingworth is now a very good fellow, and so he means to stick to him. Consequently, when his lordship insists upon Gerald keeping to the bargain, and reminds his mother that the boy will be her "judge as well as her son," should the truth of her past be brought to light, Mrs Arbuthnot is induced to hold it still secret. Unfortunately for this secret, Mrs Allonby, one of Lady Hunstanton's guests, has goaded Lord Illingworth into promising to kiss Miss Hester Worsley. This he does, much to the disgust of the fair Puritan, who loudly announces that she has been insulted. Gerald's eyes are suddenly opened to Lord Illingworth's turpitude, and with the unbridled passion of the headstrong lover cries out that he will kill him! Which, apparently, he would have done, had not Mrs Arbuthnot stepped forward, and to everybody's surprise intervened with the dramatic: "No—he is your father!"

Tableau. In the final act Hester Worsley, now that she knows Mrs Arbuthnot, and is determined in spite of all to marry Gerald, solves every difficulty by carrying off the mother and son to her home in the New World, where we may presume the young couple marry, and live happily ever afterwards. Before her departure from England, however, Mrs Arbuthnot, madened by the cynical offer of tardy reparation by marriage on the part of Lord Illingworth, strikes him across the face with a glove, and at the end of the play alludes to him as "a man of no importance"; which balances his earlier description of her as "a woman of no importance."

As I have pointed out elsewhere, many of the epigrams in this play were lifted bodily from "The Picture of Dorian Gray," but after these are eliminated there remain enough to establish the reputation of any dramatist as a wit and epigrammatist of the very first rank. Much would be forgiven for one definition alone, that of the foxhunter—"the unspeakable in pursuit of the uneatable." And Sheridan himself might envy the pronouncement that "the youth of America is its oldest tradition."

But apart from brilliant repartee and amusing paradox, the piece is full of passages of rare beauty and moments of touching pathos. Hester Worsley's speech anent Society, which she describes as being "like a leper in purple,"

“a dead thing smeared with gold,” is as finely written a piece of declamation as any actress could desire, apart from its high literary qualities ; and Mrs Arbuthnot’s confession to her boy and her appeal to him for mercy are conceived in a spirit of delicacy and reticence that only the highest art can attain. Her pathetic peroration : “Child of my shame, be still the child of my shame,” touches the deepest chords of human sorrow and anguish. With a masterly knowledge of what the theatre requires, he gives us Hester at the beginning of the play inveighing against any departure from the moral code and quoting the Old Testament anent the sins of the father being visited on the children. “It is God’s law,” she ends up—“it is God’s terrible law.” Later, when she begs Mrs Arbuthnot to come away to other climes, “where there are green valleys and fresh waters” and the poor woman for whom the world is shrivelled to a palm’s breadth confronts her with her own pronouncement, how beautifully introduced is her recantation : “Don’t say that, God’s law is only love.” It has been objected to Hester that she is a prig, but no girl could be a prig who could utter a sentiment like that. She is a fine specimen of the girlhood of the late nineteenth century, travelled, cultured, frank, and fearless, and above all pure. In the artificial atmosphere of Hunstanton, where the guests are all mere worldings, her purity and

goodness stand out in high relief. If there is a prig it is Gerald who, whether he be listening to Lord Illingworth's worldly teaching as to "a well-tied tie being the first serious step in life," or hearing the story of his mother's sin, is a singularly uninteresting and commonplace young man. As to the other characters they are all admirable sketches of Society folk. Lady Caroline Pontefract tyrannising over her husband and making that gay old gentleman put on his goloshes and muffler is a delightful type of those old-fashioned *grandes dames* who have the peerage at their fingers' ends. Nothing could be more delightfully characteristic than her opining, when Hester tells her that some of the States of America are as big as France and England put together, that they must find it very draughty. Lady Hunstanton too, who prattles away about everybody and everything and gets mixed up in all her statements, as for instance, when referring to somebody as a clergyman who wanted to be a lunatic, she is uncertain if it was not a lunatic who wanted to be a clergyman, but who at any-rate wore straws in his hair or something equally odd, is drawn with a fidelity to nature that shows what a really great student of character Oscar Wilde was. No less admirable a portrayal is that of the worldly archdeacon whose wife is almost blind, quite deaf and a confirmed invalid, yet, nevertheless, is quite happy, for though she

can no longer hear his sermons she reads them at home. He it is whom Lord Illingworth shocks so profoundly, first by his assertion that every saint has a past and every sinner has a future, and finally by the flippant remark that the secret of life is to be always on the lookout for temptations, which are becoming so exceedingly scarce that he sometimes passes a whole day without coming across one. As literature alone, the play deserves to live, and will live, as a *piece de théâtre*. It has met with more success than any play of the first class within the last twenty years. The reason for that is not far to seek—it is essentially human, and the woman's interest—the keynote of the story—appeals to man and woman equally. I have seen rough Lancashire audiences, bucolic boors in small country towns, and dour hard-headed Scotsmen, sit spellbound as the story of the woman's sin and her repentance was unfolded before them. A play that can do that is imperishable, and it is no disparagement to the other brilliant dramatic works of the author that, as a popular play which will ever find favour with audiences of every class and kind, on account of its human interest and its pathos, "A Woman Of No Importance" is certain of immortality.

“THE IDEAL HUSBAND”

(First produced at the Haymarket Theatre, under the management of Mr Lewis Waller and Mr H. H. Morell on 3rd January 1895)

THIS, the third of Oscar Wilde's plays in their order of production, is undoubtedly the most dramatic. The action is rapid, the interest of the story sustained to the very end, and the dialogue always to the point. Each of the principal characters concerned in the carrying out of the plot is a distinct individualised type. What each one says or does is entirely in keeping with his, or her, personality. And that personality is in each case a well-marked and skilfully drawn one. The four *personæ* who are engaged in conducting the intrigue of this comedy are Sir Robert Chiltern, Lady Chiltern (his wife), Lord Goring, and Mrs Cheveley. A charming *ingénue* in the person of Miss Mabel Chiltern (Sir Robert's sister) is also instrumental in bringing the love-interest to a happy hymeneal issue. The author of their being has handed down to us, in his own inimitable way, his conception of them. Here it is :

“*Sir Robert Chiltern.* A man of forty, but looking somewhat younger. Clean-shaven, with finely-cut features, dark-haired and dark-eyed. A personality of mark. Not popular—few

personalities are. But intensely admired by the few, and deeply respected of the many. The note of his manner is that of perfect distinction, with a slight touch of pride. One feels that he is conscious of the success he has made in life. A nervous temperament, with a tired look. The firmly-chiselled mouth and chin contrast strikingly with the romantic expression in the deep-set eyes. The variance is suggestive of an almost complete separation of passion and intellect, as though thought and emotion were each isolated in its own sphere through some violence of will-power. There is no nervousness in the nostrils, and in the pale, thin, pointed hands. It would be inaccurate to call him picturesque. Picturesqueness cannot survive the House of Commons. But Vandyck would have liked to paint his head."

Of *Lady Chiltern* we do not get more than that she is "a woman of grave Greek beauty about twenty-seven years of age."

This is *Lord Goring*: "Thirty-four, but always says he is younger. A well-bred expressionless face. He is clever, but would not like to be thought so. A flawless dandy, he would be annoyed if he were considered romantic. He plays with life, and is on perfectly good terms with the world. He is fond of being misunderstood. It gives him a post of vantage."

Mrs Cheveley, the *âme damnée* of the plot, is

thus portrayed: "Tall, and rather slight. Lips very thin and highly coloured, a line of scarlet on a pallid face. Venetian red hair, aquiline nose, a long throat. Rouge accentuates the natural paleness of her complexion. Grey-green eyes that move restlessly. She is in heliotrope, with diamonds. She looks rather like an orchid, and makes great demands on one's curiosity. In all her movements she is extremely graceful. A work of art on the whole, but showing the influence of too many schools."

In these delicious word-pictures we gain for once an idea as to how the author considered his characters, both physically and psychically. It is interesting to note that of the four published plays this is the only one in which such intimate directions are to be found. Was the author, for once in a way, allowing himself a measure of poetic licence, and giving free but eminently unpractical play to his imagination? Who may tell? At anyrate, however high he may have soared in his requirements of the performers, he comes down steadily to earth in his management of the plot, which is acted out on these lines.

In the first act we find Lady Chiltern, whose husband is Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, giving a party at her house in Grosvenor Square. Here, among other fashionable folk who flit across the scene, we are introduced to Lord

Goring, between whom and Mabel Chiltern there is evidently a more or less serious flirtation going on, especially on the young lady's side. Shortly after his first entrance Lord Goring "saunters over to Mabel Chiltern."

Mabel Chiltern. You are very late!

Lord Goring. Have you missed me?

Mabel Chiltern. Awfully!

Lord Goring. Then I am sorry I did not stay away longer. I like being missed.

Mabel Chiltern. How very selfish of you.

Lord Goring. I am very selfish.

Mabel Chiltern. You are always telling me of your bad qualities, Lord Goring.

Lord Goring. I have only told you half of them as yet, Miss Mabel. . . .

Mabel Chiltern. Well, I delight in your bad qualities. I wouldn't have you part with one of them.

Lord Goring. How very nice of you! But then you are always nice. By the way, I want to ask you a question, Miss Mabel. Who brought Mrs Cheveley here? That woman in heliotrope who has just gone out of the room with your brother?

Mabel Chiltern. Oh, I think Lady Markby brought her. Why do you ask?

Lord Goring. I hadn't seen her for years, that is all.

But Lord Goring did not say, of course, all he knew about the brilliant Mrs Cheveley, who is very *répondue* in the diplomatic world at Vienna, and has, in her day, been the heroine of much pretty gossip. The object of her present visit to London is to obtain an introduction to Sir Robert Chiltern, and it is when they first meet that the dramatic interest of the story commences. The lady, it appears, has invested largely, too largely, in a great political and financial scheme called the Argentine Canal Company, acting on the advice of a certain Baron Arnheim, now dead, who was also a friend of Sir Robert Chiltern's. When Mrs Cheveley informs Sir Robert what her position is, he denounces the scheme as "a commonplace Stock Exchange swindle."

Sir Robert Chiltern. Believe me, Mrs Cheveley, it is a swindle. . . . I sent out a special commission to inquire into the matter privately and they report that the works are hardly begun, and as for the money already subscribed, no one seems to know what has become of it.

A little later on he says "the success of the Canal depends of course on the attitude of England, and I am going to lay the report of the Commissioners before the House of Commons."

Mrs Cheveley. That you must not do. In

your own interests, Sir Robert, to say nothing of mine, you must not do that.

Sir Robert Chiltern. (*Looking at her in wonder.*)
In my own interests? My dear Mrs Cheveley, what do you mean? (*Sits down beside her.*)

Mrs Cheveley. Sir Robert, I will be quite frank with you. I want you to withdraw the report that you had intended to lay before the House, on the ground that you have reason to believe that the Commissioners had been prejudiced or misinformed or something. . . . Will you do that for me? (*Naturally Sir Robert is indignant at the proposition, and proposes to call the lady's carriage for her.*)

Sir Robert Chiltern. You have lived so long abroad, Mrs Cheveley, that you seem to be unable to realise that you are talking to an English gentleman.

Mrs Cheveley. (*Detains him by touching his arm with her fan, and keeping it there while she is talking.*) "I realise that I am talking to a man who laid the foundation of his fortune by selling to a Stock Exchange speculator a Cabinet secret.

This is unfortunately only too true. For, years ago, when secretary to Lord Radley, "a great important minister," Sir Robert has written to Baron Arnheim a letter telling the Baron to buy Suez Canal shares—a letter written three days before the Government announced its own

purchase, and which letter also is in Mrs Cheveley's possession! Here is a fine situation with a vengeance! By threatening to publish the scandal and the proofs of it in some leading newspaper, Mrs Cheveley induces the unfortunate Sir Robert to consent to withdraw the report, and state in the House that he believes there are possibilities in the scheme. In return for which she will give him back the compromising letter. So far, so good. She has won her cause. But, true woman as she is, she cannot conceal her triumph from Lady Chiltern as she is leaving the party.

Lady Chiltern. Why did you wish to meet my husband, Mrs Cheveley?

Mrs Cheveley. Oh, I will tell you. I wanted to interest him in this Argentine Canal Scheme, of which I daresay you have heard. And I found him most susceptible—susceptible to reason,—I mean. A rare thing in a man. I converted him in ten minutes. He is going to make a speech in the House to-morrow night, in favour of the idea. We must go to the Ladies' Gallery and hear him. It will be a great occasion.

And so she goes gaily away, leaving her hostess perplexed and troubled. But in weaving her web round the hapless husband, she had not reckoned on the influence of the wife to disentangle it, and set the victim free. Yet, in a

finely-conceived, and equally well-written, scene this is what actually happened. The company have all departed and they are alone together.

Lady Chiltern. Robert, it is not true, is it? You are not going to lend your support to this Argentine speculation? You couldn't.

Sir Robert Chiltern. (*Starting.*) Who told you I intended to do so?

Lady Chiltern. That woman who has just gone out. . . . Robert, I know this woman. You don't. We were at school together. . . . She was sent away for being a thief. Why do you let her influence you?

Then after much painful probing as to why he has so suddenly changed his attitude towards the scheme, she elicits the reason.

Sir Robert Chiltern. But if I told you——

Lady Chiltern. What?

Sir Robert Chiltern. That it was necessary, vitally necessary.

Lady Chiltern. It can never be necessary to do what is not honourable. . . . Robert, tell me why you are going to do this dishonourable thing?

Sir Robert Chiltern. Gertrude, you have no right to use that word. I told you it was a question of rational compromise. It is no more than that.

But Lady Chiltern is not to be so easily put off as that. Her suspicions are aroused. She says she knows that there are "men with horrible secrets in their lives—men who had done some shameful thing, and who, in some critical moment, have to pay for it, by doing some other act of shame." She asks him boldly, is he one of these? Then, driven to bay, he tells her the one lie of his life.

Sir Robert Chiltern. Gertrude, there is nothing in my past life that you might not know.

She is satisfied. But he must write a letter to Mrs Cheveley, taking back any promise he may have given her, and that letter must be written at once. He tries to gain time, offers to go and see Mrs Cheveley to-morrow; it is too late to-night. But Lady Chiltern is inexorable, and so Sir Robert yields, and the missive is despatched to Claridge's Hotel. Then, seized with a sudden terror of what the consequences may be, he turns, with nerves all a-quiver, to his wife, pleadingly—

Sir Robert Chiltern. O, love me always, Gertrude, love me always.

Lady Chiltern. I will love you always, because you will always be worthy of love. We needs must love the highest when we see it! (*Kisses him, rises and goes out.*)

And the curtain falls upon this intensely emotional situation.

If I may seem to have quoted too freely from the dialogue, it is in part to refute the charge, so often urged by the critics, that Oscar Wilde's "talk is often an end in itself, it has no vital connection with the particular play of which it forms a part, it might as well be put into the mouth of one character as another. . . ." Now in the first act of "The Ideal Husband," when the action of the piece is being carried on at high pressure, there is not a word of the dialogue that is not pertinent, no sentence that is not significant. Whatever of wit the author may have allowed himself to indulge in springs spontaneously from the woof of the story, it is not, as was suggested in his earlier plays, "a mere parasitic growth attached to it," in which this particular comedy under consideration marks an immense advance on the methods of "The Woman Of No Importance." Here is strenuous drama, treated strenuously, and dealing with the whole gamut of human emotions. The playwright, as he progresses in his art, does not here permit himself to endanger the interest of the plot by any adventitious pleasantries on the part of the characters.

In the second act we are again in Grosvenor Square, this time in a morning-room, where Sir Robert Chiltern and Lord Goring are discussing

the awkward state of affairs. To Lord Goring the action of Sir Robert appears inexcusable.

Lord Goring. Robert, how could you have sold yourself for money?

Sir Robert Chiltern. (*Excitedly.*) I did not sell myself for money. I bought success at a great price. That is all.

Such was his point of view. Lord Goring's now is that he should have told his wife. But Sir Robert assures him that such a confession to such a woman would mean a lifelong separation. She must remain in ignorance. But now the vital question is—how is he to defend himself against Mrs Cheveley? Lord Goring answers that he must fight her.

Sir Robert Chiltern. But how?

Lord Goring. I can't tell you how at present. I have not the smallest idea. But everyone has some weak point. There is some flaw in each one of us.

The conversation is interrupted by the entrance of Lady Chiltern. Sir Robert goes out and leaves Lord Goring and his wife together. And there follows a scene, brief, but as fine as any in the play, in which Lord Goring endeavours to prepare Lady Chiltern very skilfully for the blow that may possibly fall upon her.

He deals in generalities: "I think that in practical life there is something about success that is a little unscrupulous, something about ambition that is unscrupulous always." And again: "In every nature there are elements of weakness, or worse than weakness. Supposing, for instance, that—that any public man, my father or Lord Merton, or Robert, say, had, years ago, written some foolish letter to someone. . . ."

Lady Chiltern. What do you mean by a foolish letter?

Lord Goring. A letter gravely compromising one's position. I am only putting an imaginary case.

Lady Chiltern. Robert is as incapable of doing a foolish thing, as he is of doing a wrong thing.

She is still unshaken in the belief of her husband's rectitude. And Lord Goring departs sorrowing, but not before he has assured her of his friendship that would serve her in any crisis.

Lord Goring. . . . And if you are ever in trouble, Lady Chiltern, trust me absolutely, and I will help you in every way I can. If you ever want me . . . come at once to me.

Then on the scene arrives Mrs Cheveley, accompanied by Lady Markby (for whose amusing *bavardage* I wish I could find

space) evidently to revenge herself somehow for her rebuff, ostensibly to inquire after a "diamond snake-brooch with a ruby," which she has lost, probably at Lady Chiltern's. Now the audience knows all about this "brooch-bracelet," for has not Lord Goring found it on the sofa last night, when flirting with Mabel Chiltern, and recognising it as an old and somewhat ominous friend, quietly put it in his pocket, at the same time enjoining Mabel to say nothing about the incident. So, of course, the jewel has not been found in Grosvenor Square. But when the two women are left alone, Mrs Cheveley discovers that it was Lady Chiltern who dictated Sir Robert's letter to her. A bitter passage of arms occurs between them, when Lady Chiltern discusses her adversary, who boasts herself the ally of her husband.

Lady Chiltern. How dare you class my husband with yourself? . . . Leave my house. You are unfit to enter it. (*Sir Robert enters from behind. He hears his wife's last words, and sees to whom they are addressed. He grows deadly pale.*)

Mrs Cheveley. Your house! A house bought with the price of dishonour. A house everything in which has been paid for by fraud. (*Turns round and sees Sir Robert Chiltern.*) Ask him what the origin of his fortune is! Get

him to tell you how he sold to a stockbroker a Cabinet secret. Learn from him to what you owe your position.

Lady Chiltern. It is not true! Robert! It is not true!

But Sir Robert cannot deny the accusation, and Mrs Cheveley departs, the winner of the contest. The act concludes with a terrible denunciation on the part of Sir Robert of his wife, whom he blindly accuses of having wrecked his life, by not allowing him to accept the comfortable offer made by Mrs Cheveley of absolute security from all future knowledge of the sin he had committed in his youth.

Sir Robert Chiltern. I could have killed it for ever, sent it back into its tomb, destroyed its record, burned the one witness against me. You prevented me. . . . Let women make no more ideals of men! Let them not put them on altars and bow before them, or they may ruin other lives as completely as you—you whom I have so wildly loved—have ruined mine!

Here is the sincere note of Tragedy! Surely, Oscar Wilde is among the dramatists!

The action of the third act takes place in the library of Lord Goring's house. It is inspired in the very best spirit of intrigue. Lady Chiltern, mindful of Lord Goring's friendship, has, in the

first bewilderment of her discovery, written a note to him,—“I want you. I trust you. I am coming to you. Gertrude.” Lord Goring is about to make preparations to receive her, when his father, Lord Caversham, most inconveniently looks in to pay him a visit, the object of which is to discuss his son’s matrimonial prospects. The visit, therefore, promises to be a lengthy one, and Lord Goring proposes they should adjourn to the smoking-room, advising his servant, Phipps, at the same time that he is expecting a lady to see him on particular business, and who is to be shown, on her arrival, into the drawing-room. A lady does arrive, only she is not Lady Chiltern, but Mrs Cheveley, who has not announced her advent in any way. Surprised to hear that Lord Goring is expecting a lady, and while Phipps is lighting the candles in the drawing-room, she occupies her spare moments in running through the letters on the writing-table, and comes across Lady Chiltern’s note. Here, indeed, is her opportunity. She is just about to purloin it, when Phipps returns, and she slips it under a silver-cased blotting-book that is lying on the table. She is, perforce, obliged to go into the drawing-room, from which presently she emerges, and creeps stealthily towards the writing-table. But suddenly voices are heard from the smoking-room, and she is constrained to return to her hiding-place. Lord

Caversham and his son re-enter and Lord Goring puts his father's cloak on for him, and with much relief sees him depart. But a shock is in store for him, for no sooner has Lord Caversham vanished, than no less a personage than Sir Robert Chiltern appears. In vain does Lord Goring try to get rid of his most unwelcome visitor. Sir Robert has come to talk over his trouble, and means to stay. Lady Chiltern must on no account be admitted. So he says to Phipps:

Lord Goring. When that lady calls, tell her that I am not expected home this evening. Tell her that I have been suddenly called out of town. You understand?

Phipps. The lady is in that room, my lord. You told me to show her into that room, my lord.

Lord Goring realises that things are getting a little uncomfortable, and again tries to send Sir Robert away. But Sir Robert pleads for five minutes more. He is on his way to the House of Commons. "The debate on the Argentine Canal is to begin at eleven." As he makes this announcement a chair is heard to fall in the drawing-room. He suspects a listener, and, despite Lord Goring's word of honour to the contrary, determines to see for himself, and goes into the room, leaving Lord Goring in a fearful

state of mind. He soon returns, however, "with a look of scorn on his face."

Sir Robert Chiltern. What explanation have you to give me for the presence of that woman here?

Lord Goring. Robert, I swear to you on my honour that that lady is stainless and guiltless of all offence towards you.

Sir Robert Chiltern. She is a vile, an infamous thing!

After a few more speeches, in which the *malentendu* is well kept up, Sir Robert goes out, and Lord Goring rushes to the drawing-room to meet—Mrs Cheveley.

And now this woman is going to have another duel, but this time with an enemy who is proof against her attacks. The whole of this scene is imagined and written in a masterly manner. After a little airy sparring, Lord Goring opens the match.

Lord Goring. You have come here to sell me Robert Chiltern's letter, haven't you?

Mrs Cheveley. To offer it you on conditions. How did you guess that?

Lord Goring. Because you haven't mentioned the subject. Have you got it with you?

Mrs Cheveley. (*Sitting down.*) Oh, no! A well-made dress has no pockets.

Lord Goring. What is your price for it ?

Then, Mrs Cheveley tells him that the price is—herself. She is tired of living abroad, and wants to come to London and have a salon. She vows to him that he is the only person she has ever cared for, and that on the morning of the day he marries her she will give him Sir Robert's letter. Naturally he refuses her offer. Naturally she is furious. But she still possesses the incriminating document and hurls her venomous words at his head.

Mrs Chiltern. For the privilege of being your wife I was ready to surrender a great prize, the climax of my diplomatic career. You decline. Very well. If Sir Robert doesn't uphold my Argentine Scheme, I expose him. *Voilà tout !*

But he cares not for her threats. He hasn't done with her yet, for he has got in his possession the diamond snake-brooch with a ruby ! This scene is most skilfully managed. Quite innocently he offers to return it to her—he had found it accidentally last night. And then in a moment he clasps it on her arm.

Mrs Cheveley. I never knew it could be worn as a bracelet . . . it looks very well on me as a bracelet, doesn't it ?

Lord Goring. Yes, much better than when I saw it last.

Mrs Cheveley. When did you see it last?

Lord Goring. (*Calmly.*) Oh! ten years ago, on Lady Berkshire, from whom you stole it.

Now, he has her in his power. The bracelet cannot be unclasped unless she knows the secret of the spring, and she is at his mercy, a convicted thief. He moves towards the bell to summon his servant to fetch the police. "To-morrow the Berkshires will prosecute you." What is she to do? She will do anything in the world he wants.

Lord Goring. Give me Robert Chiltern's letter.

Mrs Cheveley. I have not got it with me. I will give it you to-morrow.

Lord Goring. You know you are lying. Give it me at once. (*Mrs Cheveley pulls the letter out and hands it to him. She is horribly pale.*) This is it?

Mrs Cheveley. (*In a hoarse voice.*) Yes.

Whereupon he burns it over the lamp. So letter number one is got out of the way. But there is letter number two: Lady Chiltern's to Lord Goring. The accomplished thief sees it just showing from under the blotting-book; asks Lord Goring for a glass of water, and while his back is turned steals it. So, though she has

lost the day on one count she has gained it on another. With a bitter note of triumph in her voice she tells Lord Goring that she is going to send Lady Chiltern's "love-letter" to him to Sir Robert. He tries to wrest it from her, but she is too quick for him, and rings the electric bell. Phipps appears, and she is safe.

Mrs Cheveley. (*After a pause.*) Lord Goring merely rang that you should show me out. Good-night, Lord Goring.

And on this fine situation the curtain falls.

Space does not permit me more than to indicate how, in the fourth and last act, Sir Robert Chiltern has roundly denounced the Argentine Canal Scheme in the House of Commons, and with it the whole system of modern political finance. How Lady Chiltern's letter to Lord Goring does reach her husband, and is by him supposed to be addressed to him. How Lady Chiltern undeceives him, and confesses the truth. How Lord Goring becomes engaged to Mabel, and Sir Robert Chiltern accepts, after some hesitation, a vacant seat in the Cabinet, and peace is restored all round. These episodes, cleverly and naturally handled, bring "The Ideal Husband" to a satisfactory conclusion. It is certainly the most dramatic of all Oscar Wilde's comedies, and could well bear revival.

“THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST”

A DELICIOUSLY airily irresponsible comedy. Such is the “The Importance Of Being Earnest,” the most personally characteristic expression of Wilde’s art, and the last of the dramatic productions written under his own name. The play bubbles over with mirth and fun. It is one unbroken series of laughable situations and amusing surprises. The dialogue has all the sparkle of bubbles from a gushing spring, and is brimful of quaint conceits and diverting paradoxes. Even the genius of W. S. Gilbert in the fantastic line pales before the irresponsible frolicsomeness of the Irishman’s wit. His fancy disports itself in an atmosphere of epigrams like a young colt in a meadow. Never since the days of Sheridan has anything been written to equal the brilliancy of this trifle for serious people. No one could fail to be amused by its delicate persiflage, its youthfulness and its utter irresponsibility.

Were one to take the works of Gyp, Gilbert, Henri Lavedan and Sheridan and roll them into one, one would not even then obtain the essence of sparkling comedy that animates the play. It is a trifle, but how clever, how artistically perfect

a trifle. When it was produced at the St James's, in February 1895, one continuous ripple of laughter shook the audience, even as a field of standing corn is swayed by a passing breeze. The reading of the play alone makes one feel frivolous, and when the characters stood before one, suiting the action to the word and the word to the action, the effect was absolutely irresistible and even the gravest and most slow-witted were moved to rollicking hilarity. One critic summed it up by saying that "its title was a pun, its story a conundrum, its characters lunatics, its dialogue a 'galimatias,' and its termination a 'sell.'" Questioned as to its merits, Wilde was credited with saying that "The first act was ingenious, the second beautiful, the third abominably clever." It was most beautifully staged by Mr George Alexander, and I can see still the charming picture presented by Miss Millard in the delightful garden scene as she watered her rose bushes with a water-can filled with silver sand. The acting, too, left nothing to be desired and altogether it was a performance to linger in one's memory in the years to come.

The Ernest of the punning title is an imaginary brother, very wicked and gay, invented by John Worthing, J.P., to account to his ward (Cecily Cardew) for his frequent visits to London. John Worthing, it may be mentioned, is a foundling who was discovered when a baby in the cloak-

room at a railway station inside a black bag stamped with the initials of the absent-minded governess who had inadvertently placed him in it instead of the manuscript of a three-volume novel. Now, Worthing has a friend, a gay young dog, named Alexander Moncrieffe who likewise has invented a fictitious personage, a sick friend, visits to whom he makes serve as the reason of his absences from home. He has given this imaginary friend the name of Bunbury, and designates his little expeditions as "Bunburying." Moncrieffe lives in town, and is more or less the model Worthing has chosen when describing his imaginary brother. Worthing's ward is a romantic girl who has fallen in love with her guardian's brother from his descriptions of him. She is especially enamoured of his name, Ernest, for like old Mr Shandy she has quite pronounced views and opinions about names. Now, the reason of Worthing's constant visits to town is to see a young lady yclept Gwendolen Fairfax, a cousin of Moncrieffe's, to whom he proposes and is accepted, but, for some unexplained reason, for his periodical visits to town he adopts the name of Ernest, so that Gwendolen, who, like Cecily, has distinctive ideas about names, only knows him by that name. So it will be seen that we have already two Ernests in the field—the imaginary brother whose moral delinquencies are such a cause of

worry to Cecily's guardian, and the guardian himself masquerading as Ernest Worthing. A pretty combination for complications to start with, but the author strews Ernest about with a prodigality that excites our admiration, and he gives us a third Ernest in the person of Alexander Moncrieffe, who, learning that his friend is left alone at home, and that she is extremely beautiful, determines to go down and make love to her. In order to gain admittance to the house, he passes himself off as Ernest Worthing, the imaginary naughty brother, and is warmly welcomed by Cecily. In ten minutes he has wooed and won her, and the happy pair disappear into the house just before John Worthing arrives on the scene. Now that he has proposed and been accepted there is no longer any necessity for inventing an excuse for his absences from home, and in order to be rid of what might prove to be an embarrassing, although a purely fictitious, person, he has invented a story of his putative brother's death in Paris. He enters dressed in complete black, black frock-coat, black tie, black hatband, and black-bordered handkerchief. There follows a delightful comedy scene between him and Algernon, whose imposture he cannot expose without betraying himself. Meanwhile, Gwen-dolen has followed her sweetheart to make the acquaintance of Cecily, and now arrives *en*

scene. The two girls become bosom friends at once, and all goes happily until the name of Ernest Worthing is mentioned, and although no such person exists yet each of them imagines herself to be engaged to him. The situation is, to use a theatrical slang term, "worked up," and the young ladies pass from terms of endearment to mutual recriminations. A pitched battle is on the tapis, but with the appearance of their lovers, and their enforced explanation, peace is restored between the two, and they join forces in annihilating with scathing word and withering look the wretches who have so basely deceived them. Never, never could either of them love a man whose name was not Ernest. Each of them was engaged to Ernest Worthing, but, in the words of the immortal Betsy Prig when referring to Mrs 'Arris, "There ain't no sich person."

The situation is embarrassing and complicated. The two delinquents offer to have themselves rechristened, but the suggestion is received with withering scorn; the situation cannot be saved by any such ridiculous subterfuge; the disconsolate wretches seek consolation in an orgy of crumpets and tea cakes. Another difficulty there is also, Lady Bracknell—Gwendolen's mother—refuses to accept as her son-in-law a nameless foundling found in a railway station. However, the production of the bag leads to the

discovery of his parentage, and it turns out that his father was the husband of Lady Bracknell's sister. The question of his father's Christian name is raised, as it is thought probable that he was christened after him, and although Lady Bracknell cannot remember the name of the brother-in-law a reference to the Army List results in the discovery that it was Ernest, so that both the difficulties of birth and nomenclature are now overcome. As to Algernon, he is forgiven because he explains that his imposture was undertaken solely to see Cecily, and so the comedy ends happily as all good comedies should.

The piece is one mass of smart sayings, brilliant epigrams, and mirth-provoking lines, as when Miss Prism, Cecily's governess, tells her pupil to study political economy for an hour, but to omit, as too exciting, the depreciation of the rupee. Some of the most delightful sayings are put into the mouth of Lady Bracknell, the aristocratic dowager who is responsible for the dictum that what the age suffers from is want of principle and want of profile. Miss Prism too enunciates the aphorism that "Memory is the diary we all carry about with us," and Cecily naïvely informs us that "I keep a diary to enter the wonderful secrets of my life. If I didn't write them down I would probably forget all about them." There is also a delicious touching

of feminine amenities when, during the quarrel scene, Gwendolen says to Cecily, "I speak quite candidly—I wish that you were thirty-five and more than usually plain for your age." No woman could have written better. Even the love passages are replete with humorous lines. Cecily passing her hand through Moncrieffe's hair remarks, "I hope your hair curls naturally," and with amusing candour comes his reply, "Yes, darling, with a little help from others." The servants themselves are infected with the prevailing atmosphere of frivolity. Moncrieffe apostrophising his valet exclaims, "Lane, you're a perfect pessimist," and that imperturbable individual replies, "I do my best to give satisfaction." Again, when he remarks on the fact that though he had only two friends to dinner on the previous day and yet eight bottles of champagne appear to have been drunk, the impeccable servant corrects him with, "Eight and a pint, sir," and in reply to his question, how is it that servants drink more in bachelors' chambers than in private houses, the discreet valet explains that it is because the wines are better, adding that you do get some very poor wine nowadays in private houses.

"What is the use of the lower classes unless they set us a good example?" "Divorces are made in heaven," "To have lost one parent is a misfortune, to have lost both looks like careless-

ness," and "I am only serious about my amusements," are samples taken haphazard of the good things in the play.

It has been objected that the piece is improbable, but it was described by the author merely as "a trivial comedy for serious people." As a contributor to *The Sketch* so aptly put it at the time, "Why carp at improbability in what is confessedly the merest bubble of fancy? Why not acknowledge honestly a debt of gratitude to one who adds so unmistakably to the gaiety of the nation?"

The press were almost unanimous in their appreciation of the comedy. *The Athencæum's* critic wrote, "The mantle of Mr Gilbert has fallen on the shoulders of Mr Oscar Wilde, who wears it in jauntiest fashion." And *The Times* is responsible for the statement that "almost every sentence of the dialogue bristles with epigram of the now accepted pattern, the manufacture of this being apparently conducted by its patentee with the same facility as 'the butter-woman's rank to market.'" But more flattering still was the appreciation of the *Truth* critic whose previous attitude to Wilde's work had been a hostile one.

"I have not the slightest intention of seriously criticising Mr O. Wilde's piece at the St James's," he writes, under the heading of "The Importance Of Being Oscar," "as well might one sit down

after dinner and attempt gravely to discuss the true inwardness of a *soufflé*. Nor, unfortunately, is it necessary to enter into details as to its wildly farcical plot. As well might one, after a successful display of fireworks in the back garden, set to work laboriously to analyse the composition of a Catherine Wheel. At the same time I wish to admit, fairly and frankly, that ‘The Importance Of Being Earnest’ amused me very much.”

It is, however, since the author’s death that the great body of critics have emitted the opinion that the play is really an extremely clever piece of work and a valuable contribution to the English drama. So many pieces are apt to get *démodés* in a few years, but now, twelve years after its production, “The Importance Of Being Earnest” is as fresh as ever, and does not date, as ladies say of their headgear. To compare the blatant nonsense that Mr Bernard Shaw foists on a credulous public as wit with the coruscating *bon mots* of his dead compatriot, as seems to be the fashion nowadays, is to show a pitiful lack of intelligence and discernment ; as well compare gooseberry wine to champagne, the fountains in Trafalgar Square to Niagara.

PART III

THE ROMANTIC DRAMAS

“SALOME”

OF all Wilde's plays the one that has provoked the greatest discussion and most excited the curiosity of the public is undoubtedly “Salomé,” which, written originally in French and then translated into English, has finally been performed in two Continents.

Never perhaps has a play, at its inception, had less of a chance than this Biblical tragedy written for a French Jewess (Madame Sarah Bernhardt) ^{no} banned by the English Censor and only produced after the disgrace and consequent downfall of its author. From Salomé's first speech to the end of the play we realise how the little part was absolutely identified in the author's mind with the actress he had written it for. To anyone who has studied, however superficially, Madame Bernhardt's peculiar methods of diction and acting, the words in the first speech—"I will not stay, I cannot stay. Why does the Tetrarch look at me all the while with his mole's eyes under his shaking eyelids?" convey at once a picture of the actress in the part. If there is a fault to be found with the character it is that Bernhardt not Salomé is depicted, and yet who shall say that there is much difference between the temperaments or the physique of the two

women. It is true that, in a letter to *The Times*, the author strenuously denied that he had written the play for Sarah, but one is inclined to take the denial with a very big grain of salt. That while in detention Wilde made most strenuous efforts to get her to produce it is a well-known fact.

The play, as even Macaulay's schoolboy knows, is based on the story of Herodias' daughter dancing before Herod for the head of John the Baptist.

An account of the episode is to be found in the 6th chapter of the Gospel of St Mark, and it is interesting to contrast the strong and simple Scriptural description with the highly decorative and glowing language of the play.

Here is St Mark's account of the incident :

- v. 21. And when a convenient day was come, that Herod on his birthday made a supper to his lords, high captains and chief *estates* of Galilee ;
- v. 22. And when the daughter of the said Herodias came in, and danced, and pleased Herod and them that sat with him, the king said unto the damsel, Ask of me whatsoever thou wilt, and I will give *it* thee.
- v. 23. And he sware unto her, Whatsoever thou shalt ask of me, I will give *it* thee, unto the half of my kingdom.
- v. 24. And she went forth, and said unto her mother, What shall I ask ? And she said, The head of John the Baptist.

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- v. 25. And she came in straightway with haste unto the king, and asked, saying, I will that thou give me by and by in a charger the head of John the Baptist.
- v. 26. And the king was exceeding sorry; *yet* for his oath's sake, and for their sakes which sat with him, he would not reject her.
- v. 27. And immediately the king sent an executioner, and commanded his head to be brought: and he went and beheaded him in the prison,
- v. 28. And brought his head in a charger, and gave it to the damsel: and the damsel gave it to her mother.
- v. 29. And when his disciples heard *of it*, they came and took up his corpse, and laid it in a tomb.

The account given by St Matthew (xiv. 6) is equally terse, but the fuller description of the scene as reconstructed by Dean Farrar in his "Life of Christ" is worth quoting.

"But Herodias had craftily provided the king with an unexpected and exciting pleasure, the spectacle of which would be sure to enrapture such guests as his. Dancers and dancing-women were at that time in great request. The passion for witnessing these too often degrading representations had naturally made its way into the Sadducean and semi-pagan court of these usurping Edomites, and Herod the Great had built in his palace, a theatre for the Thymelici. A luxurious feast of the period was not regarded as complete unless it closed with some gross panto.

mimic representation ; and doubtless Herod had adopted the evil fashion of his day. But he had not anticipated for his guests the rare luxury of seeing a princess—his own great-niece, a granddaughter of Herod the Great and of Mariamne, a descendant, therefore, of Simon the High Priest and the line of Maccabæan princes—a princess who afterwards became the wife of a tetrarch and the mother of a king—honouring them by degrading herself into a scenic dancer. Yet when the banquet was over, when the guests were full of meat and flushed with wine, Salomé herself, the daughter of Herodias, then in the prime of her young and lustrous beauty, executed, as it would now be expressed, a *pas seul* ‘in the midst of’ those dissolute and half-intoxicated revellers. ‘She came in and danced, and pleased Herod, and them that sat at meat with him.’ And he, like another Xerxes, in the delirium of his drunken approval, swore to this degraded girl, in the presence of his guests, that he would give her anything for which she asked, even to the half of his kingdom.

“The girl flew to her mother, and said, ‘What shall I ask?’ It was exactly what Herodias expected, and she might have asked for robes, or jewels, or palaces, or whatever such a woman loves. But to a mind like hers revenge was sweeter than wealth or pride. We may imagine with what fierce malice she hissed out the answer,

‘The head of John the Baptist.’ And coming in before the king *immediately with haste*—(what a touch is that! and how apt a pupil did the wicked mother find in her wicked daughter!)—Salomé exclaimed, ‘My wish is that you give *me here, immediately*, on a dish, the head of John the Baptist.’ Her indecent haste, her hideous petition, show that she shared the furies of her race. Did she think that in that infamous period, and among those infamous guests, her petition would be received with a burst of laughter? Did she hope to kindle their merriment to a still higher pitch by the sense of the delightful wickedness involved in a young and beautiful girl asking—nay, imperiously demanding—that then and there, on one of the golden dishes which graced the board, should be given into her own hands the gory head of the Prophet whose words had made a thousand bold hearts quail?

“If so, she was disappointed. The tetrarch, at anyrate, was plunged into grief by her request; it more than did away with the pleasure of her disgraceful dance; it was a bitter termination of his birthday feast. Fear, policy, remorse, superstition, even whatever poor spark of better feeling remained unquenched under the white ashes of a heart consumed by evil passions, made him shrink in disgust from this sudden execution. He must have felt that he had been duped out of his own will by the cunning stratagem of his

unrelenting paramour. If a single touch of manliness had been left in him he would have repudiated the request as one which did not fall either under the letter or the spirit of his oaths, since the life of one cannot be made the gift to another ; or he would have boldly declared that if such was her choice, his oath was more honoured by being kept. But a despicable pride and fear of man prevailed over his better impulses. More afraid of the criticisms of his guests than of the future torment of such conscience as was left him, he sent an executioner to the prison, which in all probability was not far from the banqueting hall—and so, at the bidding of a dissolute coward and to please the loathly fancies of a shameless girl, the axe fell, and the head of the noblest of the prophets was shorn away. In darkness and in secrecy the scene was enacted, and if any saw it their lips were sealed ; but the executioner emerged into the light carrying by the hair that noble head, and then and there, in all the pallor of the recent death, it was placed upon a dish from the royal table. The girl received it, and, now frightful as a Megæra, carried the hideous burden to her mother. Let us hope that those grim features haunted the souls of both thenceforth till death.

“ What became of that ghastly relic we do not know. Tradition tells us that Herodias ordered the headless trunk to be flung out over the battle-

ments for dogs and vultures to devour. On her, at anyrate, swift vengeance fell."

In a footnote the Dean mentions that Salomé subsequently married her uncle Philip, Tetrarch of Ituræa, and then her cousin Aristobulus, King of Chalcis, by whom she became the mother of three sons. The traditional death of the "dancing daughter of Herodias" is thus given by Nicephorus. "Passing over a frozen lake, the ice broke and she fell up to the neck in water, and her head was parted from her body by the violence of the fragments shaken by the water and her own fall, and so she perished."

Thus the historical accounts, now for the play itself. To begin with, let us note the stage directions. "A great terrace in the palace of Herod set above the banqueting hall. To the right there is a gigantic staircase, to the left, at the back, an old cistern surrounded by a wall of green bronze. Moonlight."

These directions for the setting of the stage are for all practical purposes useless—they would drive the most experienced stage-manager crazy, but then Wilde, more particularly in the romantic dramas, was sublimely indifferent to the mere mechanical side of stagecraft. He issued his commands and it was for the *gens du métier* to give practical effect to them. He had the picture in his mind; what matter if there were practical difficulties in the way of producing it!

That was no fault of his. It is curious to contrast his stage directions with those of a practical playwright like Shakespeare. Shakespeare, for instance, would have simply written "soldiers leaning over a balcony." There is a whole chapter of difference in the introduction of the word "some."

The time is night, that wonderful Judæan night, when the air is charged with electricity and the mysterious heart of the East throbs with the varied emotions of the centuries. "Moonlight," says the directions, and here we recall the author's almost passionate worship of moonlight. Over and over again in play, prose, essay, and verse, he writes about the moon. She possessed an almost uncanny attraction for him, and one almost wonders whether the superstition connecting certain phases of the planet with the madness of human beings may not account for a good deal that remains unexplained in the erratic career of this unfortunate genius!

A young Syrian, the "Captain of the Guard," is talking with the page of Herodias. From a subsequent description we learn that he was handsome with the dark languorous eyes of his nation, and that his voice was soft and musical. He is in love with the Princess Salomé, the daughter of Herodias, wife of the Tetrarch of Judæa, Herod Antipas, and his talk is all of her and her beauty. The page, who seems to stand

in great fear of his mistress and to be likewise oppressed with a foreboding of coming evil, tries to divert his attention to the moon, but in the moon the enamoured Syrian sees only an image of his beloved. Then the page strikes the first deep note of tragedy. To him she is like a dead woman. A noise is heard, and the soldiers comment on it and its cause—namely, the religious dissensions of the Jews. At this the young Syrian, heedless of all else, breaks in once more like a Greek chorus in praise of the Princess's beauty. (One can almost hear an imaginary Polonius exclaiming: "Still harping on my daughter.") Again the page utters a warning against the Captain's infatuation. He is certain that something terrible may happen.

As if to confirm his fears the two soldiers begin discussing the Tetrarch's sombre looks. Plain, uncultured fellows these Roman soldiers, and yet, like most of the legionaries, they have travelled far afield as may be gathered from their talk of Herod's various wives. A Cappadocian joins in their conversation. He is completely *terre à terre* and cannot understand anything but the obvious. The talk drifts on to religion, and then suddenly the voice of John the Baptist (the Jokanaan of the play) is heard from the cistern in which he is confined. There is a certain *naïveté* in the introduction of this cistern which may well provoke a smile, especi-

ally when later we meet with the stage direction "He goes down into the cistern." Historically its introduction may be correct, but one wishes that the author had chosen any other place of confinement for the prophet, at anyrate called it by any other name. In the utilitarian days of water companies and water rates the image that the word cistern evokes is painfully reminiscent of a metal tank in the lumber-room of a suburban residence. Even Longfellow, in one of his most beautiful poems, failed to rob the word of its associations.

The voice strikes a perfectly new note in the play, and announces in Scriptural language the advent of the Messiah. Then the soldiers, taking the place of the *raisonneur* in French plays, proceed to discuss and describe the prophet. From them we learn that he is gentle and holy, grateful for the smallest attentions of his guards, that when he came from the desert he was clothed in camel's hair. We incidentally learn that he is constantly uttering warnings and prophecies, and that by the Tetrarch's orders no one is allowed to see him, much less communi-cate with him. Then the Cappadocian comments on the strange nature of the prison, and is informed that Herodias' first husband, the brother of Herod, was imprisoned in it for twelve years, and was finally strangled. The question by whom, so naturally put, introduces,

with a master's certainty of touch, another grim note, as Naaman, the executioner, a gigantic negro, is pointed out as the perpetrator of the deed. Mention is also made of the mandate he received to carry it out in the shape of the Tetrarch's death ring.

Thus the soldiers gossip among themselves and Salomé's entrance, which takes place almost immediately, is in stage parlance "worked up" by the rapturous description of her movements and her person, delivered by the Syrian, and the awestruck pleading of the page that he should not look at her.

The Princess is trembling with emotion, and in her first speech gives us the keynote to the action of the play by referring to the glances of desire that Herod casts on her. To a timid question of the Syrian's she vouchsafes no answer, but proceeds to comment on the sweetness of the night air and the heterogenous collection of guests whom Herod is entertaining. The proffer of a seat by the lovesick captain remains likewise unnoticed, and like a chorus the page beseeches him once more not to look at her, and presages coming evil. And again, the moon is invoked as this daughter of kings soliloquises on the coldness and chastity of the orb of heaven.

Her meditations are interrupted by the prophet's voice ringing out mysteriously on the

night air, and then a long dialogue in short, pregnant sentences takes place between Salomé and two soldiers as to the hidden speaker. We learn that Herod is afraid of him and that the man of God is constantly inveighing against Herodias.

From time to time the Princess is interrupted by a messenger from the Tetrarch requesting her to return, but she has no thought for anyone but the prisoner in the cistern. She wishes to see him, but is informed that this is against the Tetrarch's orders. Then she deliberately sets herself to make the Syrian captain disobey his orders. She pleads with him, she plays on his manhood by taunting him with being afraid of his charge, she promises him a flower, "a little green flower." He remains unmoved. The Princess uses all her blandishments to obtain her end; and we can realise what a clever actress would make of the scene as she murmurs, "I will look at you through the muslin veils, I will look at you, Narraboth, it may be I will smile at you. Look at me, Narraboth, look at me." And with more honeyed words and sentences, left unfinished, she induces the young officer to break his trust. The speech consists only of a few lines, and yet gives opportunity for as fine a piece of acting as any player could desire. The soldier yields, and the page suddenly draws attention to the moon, in which

he discovers the hand of a dead woman drawing a shroud over herself, though the Syrian can only discover in her a likeness to the object of his infatuation. Jokanaan is brought forth, and inquires for Herod, for whom he prophesies an early death, and then for Herodias, the list of whose iniquities he enumerates.

His fierce denunciations terrify Salomé, and in a wonderful piece of word-painting she describes the cavernous depths of his eyes and the terrors lying behind them. The Syrian begs her not to stay, but she is fascinated by the ivory whiteness of the prophet's body and desire enters her soul. Her fiery glances trouble the prophet, he inquires who she is. He refuses to be gazed at by her "golden eyes under her gilded eyelids." She reveals herself, and he bids her begone, referring to her mother's iniquities. His voice moves her and she begs him to speak again. The young Syrian's piteous remonstrance, "Princess! Princess!" is unheeded, and she addresses the prophet once more. Here follows one of the finest and most dangerous scenes of the play, and yet one which, properly treated, is neither irreverent nor, as has been stupidly asserted, immoral.

Maddened by desire, this high-born Princess makes violent love in language of supreme beauty to the ascetic dweller in the desert. His body, his hair, his mouth, are in turn the object

of her praise only to be vilified one by one as he drives her back with scathing words. She insists that she shall kiss his mouth, and the jealous Syrian begs her who is like "a garden of myrrh" not to "speak these things." She insists, she will kiss his mouth. The Syrian kills himself, falling on his own sword. This tragic event, to which a horror-struck soldier draws her attention, does not for one second divert her attention from the pursuit of her passion. Again and again, in spite of Jokanaan's warnings and exhortations (for even in this supreme hour of horror and temptation he preaches the Gospel of his Master), she pleads for a kiss of his mouth. This reiteration of the request, even after the Saint has returned to his prison, is a triumph of dramatic craftsmanship.

The page laments over his dead friend to whom he had given "a little bag full of perfumes and a ring of agate that he wore always on his hand." The soldiers debate about hiding the body and then, contrary to his custom, Herod appears on the terrace accompanied by Herodias and all the Court. His first inquiry is for Salomé, and Herodias, whose suspicions are evidently aroused, tells him in identically the same words used by the page to the dead Syrian that he "must not look at her," that he is "always looking at her."

Again the regnant moon becomes a menace and a symbol. This time it is Herod who finds

a strange look in her, and whose morbid wine-heated imagination compares her to a naked woman looking for lovers and reeling like one drunk. He determines to stay on the terrace, and slips in the blood of the suicide. Terror-struck, he inquires whence it comes, and then espies the corpse. On learning whose it is, he mourns the loss of his dead favourite and discusses the question of suicide with Tigellinus, who is described in the *dramatis personæ* as "a young Roman." Herod is shaken by fears, he feels a cold wind when there is no wind, and hears "in the air something that is like the beating of wings." He devotes his attention to Salomé, who slights all his advances. Once the voice of Jokanaan is heard prophesying that the hour is at hand, and Herodias angrily orders that he should be silenced. Herod feebly upholds the prophet and strenuously maintains that he is not afraid of him as Herodias declares he is. She then inquires why, that being the case, he does not deliver him into the hands of the Jews, a suggestion that is at once taken up by one of the Jews present; and then follows a discussion between Pharisees and Sadducees and Nazarenes respecting the new Messiah. This is followed by a dialogue between Herodias and the Tetrarch, interrupted ever and again by the hollow-sounding denunciations and prophecies of Jokanaan.

Herod's mind is still filled with the thoughts

of his stepdaughter and he beseeches Salomé to dance for him, but supported by her mother she keeps on refusing. The chorus, in the person of soldiers, once again draws attention to the sombre aspect of the Tetrarch. More prophecies from Jokanaan follow, with comments from Herod and his wife.

Once more the watching soldiers remark on the gloom and menace of the despot's countenance and he himself confesses that he is sad, beseeching his wife's child to dance for him, in return for which favour he will give her all she may ask of him, even unto the half of his kingdom. Salomé snatches greedily at the bait and, in spite of her mother's reiterated protests, obtains from Herod an oath that he will grant her whatsoever she wishes if she but dance for him. Even in the midst of the joy with which her acceptance fills him, the shadow of approaching death is over him, he feels an icy wind, hears the rustle of passing wings, and feels a hot breath and the sensation of choking. The red petals of his rose garland seem to him drops of blood, and yet he tries to delude himself that he is perfectly happy.

In accordance with Salomé's instructions, slaves bring her perfumes and the seven veils and remove her sandals. Even as Herod gloats over the prospect of seeing her moving, naked feet, he recalls the fact that she will be dancing

in blood and notes that the moon has turned red even as the prophet foretold. Herodias mocks at him and taunts him with cowardice, endeavouring, at the same time, to persuade him to retire, but her appeals are interrupted by the voice of Jokanaan. The sound of his voice irritates her and she insists on going within, but Herod is obstinate, he will not go till Salomé has danced. She appeals once more to her daughter not to dance, but with an "I am ready, Tetrarch," Salomé dances "the dance of the seven veils." There are no stage directions given as to how the dance is to be performed, but whoever has seen the slow, rhythmic, and lascivious movements of an Eastern dance can well imagine it and all the passionate subtlety and exquisite grace with which this languorous daughter of Judæan kings would endow it. The ballet master who could not seize this opportunity of devising a *pas de fascination* worthy of the occasion does not know the rudiments of his art.

Herod is filled with delight and admiration. He is anxious to fulfil his pledge and bids Salomé draw near and name her reward. She does so. Her guerdon shall be the head of Jokanaan on a silver charger. At this, Herodias is filled with satisfaction, but the Tetrarch protests. Again Herodias expresses approval and Herod begs Salomé not to heed her. Proudly the dancer answers that she does not heed her mother, that

it is for her own pleasure she demands the grisly reward, and reminds her stepfather of his oath. He does not repudiate it but begs of her to choose something else, even the half of his kingdom rather than what she asks. Salomé insists, and Herodias chimes in with a recital of the insults she had suffered at the hands of Jokanaan and is peremptorily bidden to be silent by her husband, who argues with Salomé as to the terrible and improper nature of her request, offering her his great round emerald in place of the head. But Salomé is obdurate. "I demand the head of Jokanaan," she insists.

Herod wishes to speak, but she interrupts him with "The head of Jokanaan." Again Herod pleads with her and offers her fifty of his peacocks whose backs are stained with gold and their feet stained with purple, but she sullenly reiterates—"Give me the head of Jokanaan."

Herodias once more expresses approval, and her husband turns savagely on her with "Be silent! You cry out always; you cry out like a beast of prey." Then, his conscience stinging him, he pleads for Jokanaan's life, and gives vent to pious sentiments: he talks of the omnipresence of God, and then is uncertain of it. His mind is torn with doubts, and fears. He has slipped in blood and heard a beating of wings which are evil omens. Yet another appeal to Salomé is met with the uncompromising "Give

me the head of Jokanaan." He makes one last appeal, he enumerates his treasures, jewels hidden away that Herodias even has never seen; he describes the precious stones in his treasury. All these he offers her. He will add cups of gold that if any enemy pour poison into them will turn to silver, sandals encrusted with glass, mantles from the land of the Seres, bracelets from the City of Euphrates; nay even the mantle of the High Priest shall she have, the very veil of the Temple. Above the angry protests of the Jews rises Salomé's "Give me the head of Jokanaan," and sinking back into his seat the weak man gives way and hands the ring of death to a soldier, who straightway bears it to the executioner. As soon as his scared official has disappeared into the cistern Salomé leans over it and listens. She is quivering with excitement and is indignant that there is no sound of a struggle. She calls to Naaman to strike. There is no answer—she can hear nothing. Then there is the sound . . . something has fallen on the ground. She fancies it is the executioner's sword and that he is afraid to carry out his task. She bids the page order the soldiers to bring her the head. He recoils from her and she turns to the men themselves bidding them carry out the sentence. They likewise recoil, and just as she turns to Herod himself with a demand for the head, a huge black arm is extended from the

cistern presenting the head of Jokanaan on a silver shield. She seizes it eagerly. Meanwhile the cowering Tetrarch covers his face with his cloak and a smile of triumph illumines the face of Herodias. All the tigress in Salomé is awakened; she apostrophises the head. He would not let her kiss his mouth. Well, she ~~will~~ will kiss it now, she will fasten her teeth in it. She twits the eyes and the tongue with their present impotence, she will throw the head to the dogs and the birds of the air. But anon her mood changes, she recalls all that in him had appealed to her, and laments over the fact that, though she loves him still, her desire for him can now never be appeased.

All Herod's superstitious fears are awakened, he upbraids Herodias for her daughter's crime, and mounts the staircase to enter the palace. The stage darkens and Salomé, a moonbeam falling on her, is heard apostrophising the head, the lips of which she has just kissed. Herod turns, and, seeing her, orders her to be killed, and the soldiers, rushing forward, crush her with their shields.

It will be seen that the dramatist has awarded the fate meted out in ~~Scripture to Herodias to~~ the daughter and not the mother, a poetic licence for which no one will blame him.

In reading the play carefully and critically one cannot but be struck with the influence of

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Maeterlinck in the atmosphere and construction, and of Flaubert in the gorgeous imagery of the dialogue, the *décor des phrases*, so to speak. An artist in words Wilde also proves himself in stagecraft in this play. Not the mere mechanical setting, of which I shall speak later, but the ability to lead up to a situation, the power to convey a whole volume in a few words to fill the audience with a sense of impending tragedy, and to utilise outside influences to enhance the value of the scenes. Thus, the references to the moon by the various characters are so many stage settings for the emotion of the moment, verbal pictures illustrating the state of mind of the speaker, or the trend of the action. It has been objected that the constant reiteration of a given phrase is a mere trick and Max Nordau has set it down as a mark of insanity, but in the hands of an artist the use of that "trick" incalculably enhances the value of the dialogue, although when employed by a bungler the repetition would be as senseless and irritating as the conversational remarks of a parrot. The young Syrian's admiration for Salomé, the page's fears and warnings, Salomé's insistence that she will kiss Jokanaan's mouth, later on her insistence on having his head, the very comments of the soldiers on Herod's sombre look are all brought in with a thoroughly definite purpose, and it would be difficult to find an equally

simple and effective way of achieving that purpose.

A favourite device of the author was to introduce, apparently casually, a sentence or word at the beginning of the play to be repeated or used with telling effect at the end. For instance, in "A Woman Of No Importance" Lord Illingworth's casual remark—"Oh, no one—a woman of no importance," which brings down the curtain on the first act, is used with a slight alteration at the end of the play in Mrs Arbuthnot's reply to Gerald's inquiry as to who her visitor has been, "Ah, no one—a man of no importance." In the same way Salomé's reiterated cry, "I will kiss the mouth of Jokanaan," in her scene with the prophet gives added strength to her bitterly triumphant cry as, holding the severed head in her hands, she repeats at three different intervals, "I have kissed thy mouth, Jokanaan."

Apart from all questions of stage technique, Wilde had the incomparable gift of finding *le mot juste*, of conveying a portrait in half-a-dozen words. Could anything give one a more distinct portrait of Herod than Salomé's description of his "mole's eyes under his shaking eyelids," or would it be possible to explain Herod's passion for his stepdaughter in fewer words than her soliloquy: "It is strange that the husband of my mother looks at me like that. I know not what it means. In truth, yes, I know it." There

is not a word wasted or misplaced, there is not a superfluous syllable.

I have spoken of the influence of Flaubert or his language, but there was in Wilde a thoroughly Eastern love of colour which found its expression in sensuous richness of sound, jewelled words, wonderfully employed to effect a contrast with the horror in which he seemed to take a strange delight. The rich, decorative phrases only enhance the constant presence of the weird and *macabre*, while in its turn the horror gives an almost painful lustre to the words.

The play has been assailed as immoral, but this certainly is not so. The setting of an Eastern drama is not that of a Western, and the morals and customs of the East are no more to be judged by a Western standard than the Court of Herod to be compared with that of Edward the Seventh.

The play deals frankly with a sensuous episode, and if the author has introduced the proper atmosphere he is only doing in words what every artist does in painting. Compare "Salomé" with Shakespeare's one Eastern play, "Cleopatra," and though the treatment may be a little more modern, a trifle more decadent, the same non-morality rather than immorality is to be found in the principal characters.

I fancy that a great deal of the prejudice still existing in England against the play is due to

the illustrations of the late Aubrey Beardsley. Beardsley was a personal friend of mine, and it, therefore, pains me to have to frankly confess that, clever and decorative as his drawings undoubtedly are, they are unhealthy in this instance, unhealthy and evil in suggestion. I can imagine no more pruriently horrible nightmare than these pictures of foul-faced, satyrlike men, feminine youths and leering women. The worst of Beardsley's women is that, in spite of their lubricity, they grow on one, and now and then one suddenly traces in their features a likeness to really good women one has known. It is as though something Satanic had been worked into the ripe-lipped face of a girl. Such as these might have been the emissaries of Satan who tempted anchorites of old to commit unpardonable sins. Moreover, many of the illustrations have nothing whatever to do with the text. I may be wrong, but I cannot for the life of me see what connection there is between "Salomé," the play, and "The Peacock Skirt" or "The Black Cape." Nor can I see the object of modernising the "Stomach Dance," save to impart an extra doze of lubricity into the subject. The *leit motif* of all Beardsley's art was to *épater les bourgeois*, to horrify the ordinary stolid Philistine, and he would hesitate at nothing, however *outré*, to attain this end. In these drawings he surpassed himself in that respect, and one can only wonder

that a publisher was found daring enough to publish them. The subject is a painful one to me, but I should not have been doing my duty as a critic of the play had I not remarked upon it. An edition from which the drawings are omitted can, however, be bought to-day.

I have already commented on the vagueness of the directions as to the setting of the scene, and it may not be out of place to quote here a letter I have received from a well-known stage-manager on the subject. "You ask me how I would set the scene in question in accordance with the printed directions, and I reply frankly that I should be puzzled to do so even were the scene to consist of the banqueting hall with the balustraded terrace built up above it. The whole action of the piece takes place on the terrace, from which the actors are supposed to overlook the banqueting hall, so that the latter apartment need not be in view of the audience, but the gigantic staircase on the *R.* I confess fogs me. Where does it lead to, and, save for Herod's exit at the end of the play, of what use is it? It only lumbers up the stage, and looks out of place (to my mind, at anyrate) on a terrace.

"By the cistern I presume the author means a well, though how on earth the actor who plays Jokanaan is going to manage to scramble in and out of it with dignity so as not to provoke the hilarity of the audience is beyond my ken. I

note that in the production of the opera at Dresden the printed directions were utterly ignored."

As has already been stated, "Salomé" was first written in French and subsequently translated into English by a friend of Oscar Wilde.

Reading it in the language in which it was originally written, one fact stands out pre-eminent—the work is that of a foreigner. The French, though correct and polished, is not virile, living French. It is too correct, too laboured; the writer does not take any liberties with his medium. The words have all the delicacy of marble statuary but lack the breath of life. I think it was Max Beerbohm who once said of Walter Pater (heaven forbid that I should agree with him) that he wrote English as though it were a dead language, and that is precisely what is the matter with Wilde's French. One longs for a *tournue de phrase*, a *mânement de mots* that would give it a semblance of native authorship. It is like a Russian talking French, and altogether too precise, too pedantically grammatical.

I believe the play was revised by Marcel Schwab, but although he may have corrected an error here and there he would hardly have liked to tamper with the text itself.

The play was written in 1892, and was accepted by Madame Sarah Bernhardt, who was to have produced it during her season at the Palace Theatre. It was already in full rehearsal when

it was prohibited by the Censor. A great deal of abuse and ridicule has been heaped on that official for this, but in all fairness to him it must be admitted that he had no choice in the matter. Rightly or wrongly plays dealing with Biblical subjects are not allowed to be performed on the English stage, and the Censor's business is to see that the rules and regulations governing stage productions are duly observed.

The author was greatly incensed at the refusal of the Lord Chamberlain's officer to license the piece, and talked (whether seriously or not is a moot point) of leaving England for ever and taking out naturalisation papers as a French citizen. This threat he never carried out.

Meanwhile Madame Sarah Bernhardt had taken the play back to Paris with her, promising to produce it at her own theatre of the Porte St Martin at the very first opportunity, a promise that was never fulfilled. Moreover, when a couple of years later Wilde, then a prisoner awaiting his trial, finding himself penniless, sent a friend to her to explain how he was circumstanced, and offering to sell her the play outright for a comparatively small sum of money in order that he might be able to pay for his defence, this incomparable *poseuse* was profuse in her expressions of sympathy and admiration for *ce grand artiste* and promised to assist him to the best of her ability. She had the cruelty to delude with

false hopes a man suffering a mental martyrdom, and after buoying him up from day to day with promises of financial assistance, the Jewess not considering the investment a remunerative one, shut the door to his emissary, and failed to keep her word. Now that the foreign royalties on play and opera amount to a considerable sum annually her Hebrew heart must be consumed with rage at having missed such "a good thing."

The piece was first produced at the Théâtre Libre in Paris in 1896 by Monsieur Luigne Poë with Lina Muntz as Salomé. The news of the production reached Wilde in his prison cell at Reading, and in a letter to a friend the following reference to it occurs:—

"Please say how gratified I was at the performance of my play, and have my thanks conveyed to Luigne Poë. It is something that at a time of disgrace and shame I should still be regarded as an artist. I wish I could feel more pleasure, but I seem dead to all emotions except those of anguish and despair. However, please let Luigne Poë know I am sensible of the honour he has done me. He is a poet himself. Write to me in answer to this, and try and see what Lemaitre, Bauer, and Sarcey said of 'Salomé.'"

There is something intensely pathetic in the picture of Convict 33 writing to know what the foremost critics of the most artistic city in Europe have to say concerning the child of his brain.

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The play was eventually privately produced in English by the New Stage Club in May 1905 at the Bijou Theatre, Archer Street.

The following is the programme on that occasion :—

THE NEW STAGE CLUB

“SALOMÉ”

BY OSCAR WILDE

AT THE BIJOU THEATRE, Archer Street, W.

May 10th and May 13th 1905

Characters of the drama in the order of their speaking :

A Young Syrian Captain	Mr HERBERT ALEXANDER
Page of Herodias	Mrs GWENDOLEN BISHOP
1st Soldier	Mr CHARLES GEE
2nd Soldier	Mr RALPH DE ROHAN
Cappadocian	Mr CHARLES DALMON
Jokanaan	Mr VINCENT NELLO
Naaman the Executioner	Mr W. EVELYN OSBORN
Salomé	Miss MILLICENT MURBY
Slave	Miss CARRIE KEITH
Herod	Mr ROBERT FARQUHARSON
Herodias	Miss LOUISE SALOM
Tigellinus	Mr C. L. DELPH

Slaves, Jews, Nazarenes, and Soldiers by

Miss Stansfelds, Messrs Bernhard Smith, Fredk. Stanley Smith, John Bate, Stephen Bagehot and Frederick Lawrence.

SCENE—THE GREAT TERRACE OUTSIDE THE PALACE OF
HEROD.

Stage Management under the direction of MISS FLORENCE
FARR.

The following paragraphs are taken from a criticism on the performance which appeared in *The Daily Chronicle* of 11th May 1905 :

“If only the dazzling and unfortunate genius who wrote ‘Salomé’ could have seen it acted as it was acted yesterday at the little Bijou Theatre ! One fears, if he had, he would have found that little phrase of his—‘the importance of being earnest’—a more delicately true satire than ever upon our sometimes appalling seriousness.

“Quite a brilliant and crowded audience had responded to what seemed an undoubtedly daring and interesting venture. Many seemed to have come out of mere curiosity to see a play the censor had forbidden ; some through knowing what a beautiful, passionate, and in its real altitude wholly inoffensive play ‘Salomé’ is.

“As those who had read the play were aware, this was in no way the fault of the author of ‘Salomé.’ Its offence in the censor’s eyes—and, considering the average audience, he was doubtless wise—was that it represents Salomé making love to John the Baptist, failing to win him to her desires, and asking for his death from Herod, as revenge. This, of course, is not Biblical, but is a fairly widespread tradition.

“In the play, as it is written, this love scene is just a very beautiful piece of sheer passionate speech, full of luxurious, Oriental imagery, much of which is taken straight from the ‘Song of

Solomon.' It is done very cleverly, very gracefully. It is not religious, but it is, in itself, neither blasphemous nor obscene, whatever it may be in the ears of those who hear it. It might possibly, perhaps, be acted grossly; acted naturally and beautifully it would show itself at least art.

"In the hands, however, of the New Stage Club it was treated after neither of these methods. It was treated solemnly, dreamily, phlegmatically, as a sort of cross between Maeterlinck and a 'mystery play.'

"The whole of the play was done in this manner, all save two parts—one, that of Herodias (Miss Salom), which was excellently and vigorously played: the other, that of Herod, which was completely spoiled by an actor who gave what appeared to be a sort of semi-grotesque portrait of one of the late Roman emperors. Even the play itself represents the usurping Idumean as a terrific figure of ignorant strength and lustfulness and power 'walking mightily in his greatness.' Some of the most luxurious speeches in the whole play—above all the wonderful description of his jewels—are put into Herod's mouth. Yet he is represented at the Bijou Theatre as a doddering weakling! And even so is desperately serious.

"Altogether, beneath this pall of solemnity on the one hand and lack of real exaltation on the

as he should be!

other, the play's beauties of speech and thought had practically no chance whatever. Set as it is too, in one long act of an hour and a half, the lack of natural life and vigour made it more tiresome still. And the shade of Oscar Wilde will doubtless be blamed for it all!"

It was unavoidable that a play necessitating the highest histrionic ability on the part of the actors, together with the greatest delicacy of touch and artistic sense of proportion, should suffer in its interpretation by a set of amateurs, however enthusiastic.

A second performance, given in June 1906 by the Literary Stage Society, was far more successful from an artistic point of view. This was in a great measure due to the admirable stage setting designed by one who is an artist to his finger tips, Mr C. S. Ricketts, and who, having been a personal friend of the author's, could enter thoroughly into the spirit of the play. The scene was laid in Herod's tent, the long blue folds of which, with a background curtain spangled with silver stars, set off to perfection the exquisite Eastern costumes designed by the same authority. Mr Robert Farquharson was the Herod and Miss Darragh the Salomé.

But even this performance was far from being up to the standard the play demands, and Dr Max Meyerfeld, who has done so much to make Wilde's work known in Germany, wrote of it:

“The most notable feature of the production of ‘Salomé’ was the costumes, designed by Mr C. S. Ricketts—a marvellous harmony of blue and green and silver. Here praise must end. The stage was left ridiculously bare, and never for a moment produced the illusion of the terrace outside Herod’s banquetting hall. Not even the cistern out of which the Prophet rises was discoverable—Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark. And the actors! Without being too exigent, I cannot but suggest that before attempting such a play they ought to have been sent by a special train to Berlin. Even then Miss Darragh would have been an impossible Salomé. She lacked nearly everything required by this complex character. The Dance of the Seven Veils was executed with all the propriety of a British governess. Mr Robert Farquharson, whose Herod delighted us last year, has now elaborated it to the verge of caricature. He emphasises far too much the neuropathic element, and revels in the repulsive symptoms of incipient softening of the brain.

“I cannot think that either of these works has yet been given a fair chance in England. They are, however, things which will endure, being independent of place and time, of dominant prejudice and caprices of taste.”

On the Continent “Salomé” has become almost a stock piece and has been performed in France,

Sweden, Holland, Italy, and Russia, and has been translated into every European tongue. It was not, however, till the production in February, 1905, of the opera of Richard Strauss at the Royal Opera House, Dresden, that "Salomé" occupied its true and proper place in the art world. Admirably rendered into German by Madame Hedwig Lachmann, the libretto is a faithful translation of the original text. The success of the opera was not for a minute in doubt, and with operatic stars of the first order to interpret the characters and an orchestra of 110 performers to do full justice to the instrumental music, nothing was left undone to make the production a memorable one. A distinguished foreign critic writing from Dresden says :

"Death in Love, and Love in Death, that is the whole piece. Death of Narraboth, the young captain who cannot bear the burning words that Salomé addresses to Iokanaan; death of Iokanaan. Death of Salomé, impending death of Herod Antipas," and analysing the character of Salomé he continues: "It is not the Jewess 'so charming and full of touching humility' that Salomé represents, she is the Syrian who inspired the Song of Songs, for whom incest is almost a law and Semiramis, Lath, and Myrrha divinities. She is the Syrian a prey to the seven devils, who combines in her amorous cult beauty, death, and resurrection."

*distinguishing
myself*

When the opera was performed at Berlin it is interesting to remember that the Kaiser, whose views on morality are strict enough to satisfy the most exacting Puritan, far from seeing anything to object to in the story, not only was present on the opening night, but took an active interest in the rehearsals, going so far even as to suggest certain mechanical effects.

In New York a perfect storm of execration from the "ultra guid" greeted the production of Strauss's work, which was almost immediately withdrawn. It is only justice to say that the rendering of the Dance of the Seven Veils was in a great measure responsible for this.

It was also freely rumoured that the puritanical daughter of one of the millionaire directors of the Opera House had used her influence for the suppression of the new production.

It is interesting to hear what the objectors to the story have to say, and with this view I quote two extracts, one from a letter written by Mr E. A. Baughan to *The Musical Standard* and the other from a well-known critic writing in a leading provincial paper.

Mr Baughan writes :

"Oscar Wilde took nothing but the characters and the incident of John the Baptist's head being brought in a charger. All else is changed and bears no relation to the Bible story. That

would not matter had worthy use been made of the story.

“In ‘Salomé’ everything is twisted to create an atmosphere of eroticism and sensuality. That is the aim of the play and nothing else. There is none of the ‘wide bearing on life’ which you vaguely suggest. Herod is a sensuous beast who takes delight in the beautiful postures of his step-daughter. He speaks line after line of highly coloured imagery and his mental condition is that of a man on the verge of delirium tremens, brought on by drink and satyriasis. Oscar Wilde does not make him ‘sorry’ but only slightly superstitious, thus losing whatever of drama there is in the Bible narrative.

“So far, and in the drawing of Herodias, the dramatist may be allowed the licence he has taken, however. Even a Puritan must admit that art must show the evil as well as the good of life to present a perfect whole.

“But it is in the character of Salomé herself that Oscar Wilde has succeeded in his aim of shocking any man or woman of decent mind. He makes Salomé in love with John the Baptist. • It is a horrible, decadent, lascivious love. She prates of his beautiful smooth limbs and the cold, passionless lips which he will not yield to her insensate desire. It is a picture of unnatural passion, all the more terrible that Salomé is a young girl. John the Baptist’s death is brought about

as much by Salomé as her mother. The prophet will not yield himself alive to Salomé's desires, but she can, and does, feed her passion at his dead, cold lips. And that is what has disgusted New York.

"You speak of fighting for liberty in art. If such exhibitions of degraded passion are included in what you call 'liberty,' then you will be fighting for the representation on the stage of satyriasis and nymphomania, set forth with every imaginable circumstance of literary and musical skill. I can conceive of no greater degradation of Richard Strauss's genius than the illustration of this play by music."

And here is what the critic of the provincial journals has to say :

"Salomé marks the depths of all that was spurious, all that was artificial, all that was perverse. Startling to English ears, the play was not at all original. It drew its inspiration from the decadent school of France, but in that world it would rank as one of the commonplace.

"The shocking, startling idea, that so outraged the respectable Yankees, is the twisting of a story of the New Testament to the needs of a literature of the most degenerate kind. But in Paris, and particularly amongst Wilde's friends, all such ideas had lost the thrill of novelty. Pierre Louys, to whom he dedicates the book,

had couched his own 'Aphrodite' on similar perversions of history and mythology, and to treat the story of the New Testament in similar fashion was hardly likely to give pause to men who laughed at the basis of the Christian religion.

"Even Academicians like Anatole France dealt with the Gospels as the mere framework of ironical stories, and writers of the stamp of Jean Loverain out-Heroded Wilde's Herod both in audacity and point. Catulle Mendes recently produced at the Opera House in Paris an opera founded on the supposed love of Mary Magdalen for Christ. Catulle Mendes has very real talent, the opera was a great success."

Whatever the judgment of posterity may be, and there can be little doubt that it can be favourable, the play must ever appeal to the actor, the artist, and the student of literature, on account of its dramatic possibilities, its wonderful colouring, the perfection of its construction, and the mastery of its style.

It stands alone in the literature of all countries.

“THE DUCHESS OF PADUA”

THE first of all Wilde's plays was “The Duchess of Padua.” It was written at the time when he was living at the Hotel Voltaire in Paris and taking Balzac as his model. The title of the play was doubtless inspired by Webster's gloomy tragedy of another Italian duchess; and the play itself is in five acts. Although many students of his works consider that it is worthy to rank with the masterpieces of the Elizabethan drama, it must be confessed that the work, though full of promise, is immature and too obviously indebted in certain scenes to some of Shakespeare's most obvious stage tricks. He had written the play with a view to its being played by Miss Mary Anderson, but to his great disappointment she declined his offer of it.

His biographer's description of his reception of her refusal is worth quoting:

“I was with him at the Hotel Voltaire on the day when he heard from Mary Anderson, to whom he had sent a copy of the drama which was written for her. He telegraphed in the morning for her decision, and whilst we were talking together after lunch her answer came. It was unfavourable; yet, though he had founded great hopes on the production of this play, he

gave no sign of his disappointment. I can remember his tearing a little piece off the blue telegraph-form and rolling it up into a pellet and putting it into his mouth, as, by a curious habit, he did with every paper or book that came into his hands. And all he said, as he passed the telegram over to me, was, ‘This, Robert, is rather tedious.’”

The scene of the play is laid in Padua, the period being the sixteenth century, and the characters are as follows:—

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

SIMONE GESSO	Duke of Padua.
BEATRICE	His Wife.
ANDREA POLLAIUOLO . .	Cardinal of Padua.
MAFFIO PETRUCCI . . . }	Of the Ducal Household.
JEPPO VITELOZZO . . . }	
TADDEO BARDI }	
GUIDO FERRANTI	
ASCANIO CRISTOFANO . .	His Friend.
COUNT MORANZONE.	
BERNARDO CAVALCANTI .	Chief Justiciar of Padua.
HUGO	The Public Executioner.
LUCIA	A Tirewoman.

Serving-Men, Burghers, Soldiers, Falconers, Monks, etc.

The scene opens in the market, where Ascanio and Guido are awaiting the arrival of the writer of a letter who has promised to enlighten the latter as to his birth, and who will wear a violet cloak with a silver falcon embroidered on the shoulder. The stranger arrives and proves to be

Count Moranzone, who, Ascanio having been dismissed, informs the lad that he is the son of Lorenzo, the late Duke of Padua, betrayed to an ignominious death by the reigning Duke, Simone Gesso. He works on the youth's feelings and induces him to swear to avenge his father's death by slaying his betrayer, but not until Moranzone sends him his parent's dagger. Guido left alone, in a fine speech renews his oath, and as he is vowing on his drawn dagger to "forswear the love of women and that hollow bauble men call female loveliness," Beatrice descends the steps of the church, their eyes meet for a second and as she leaves the stage she turns to look at him again. "Say, who is yonder lady?" inquires the young man, and a burgher answers, "The Duchess of Padua."

In the second act the Duchess is seen pleading with her husband that he should feed and assist his starving people. On his exit she is joined by Guido, who, for the first time, declares his love, while she avows hers in turn. A pretty love scene full of tenderness and poetry is interrupted by the appearance of Count Moranzone, whom Beatrice alone catches sight of, and presently a messenger enters and hands Guido a parcel containing the fatal dagger. He will have no more to do with love—for will not his soul be stained with murder?—and steeling his heart against Beatrice he bids her farewell, telling her that there

is a barrier between them. The Duke makes a brief entrance. The Duchess will not go hunting with him. He suspects, and inquires for Guido, and with a veiled threat leaves her. She will end her life that very night, she soliloquises, and yet, why should she die, why not the Duke?

She is interrupted by Moranzone, whom she taxes with taking Guido from her. He answers that the young man does not love her nor will she ever see him more, and leaves her. She determines that that very night she will lie in Death's arms.

The third act takes place at night within the Palace. Guido enters the apartment from without by means of a rope ladder, and is met by Moranzone, to whom he declares that he will not stoop to murder, but will place the dagger, with a paper stating who he is, upon the Duke's bed and then take horse to Venice and enlist against the Infidels. Nothing Moranzone urges can move him and the latter at last leaves him.

As Guido lifts the curtain to enter the Duke's chamber he is met by Beatrice, who, after a while, confesses that she has stabbed her husband. Guido, horrified, refuses to have aught to do with her, and despite all her blandishments and entreaties remains adamant. She then begs him to draw his sword on her "and quick make

reckoning with Death, who yet licks his lips after this feast."

He wrests the dripping knife from her hand, and although she explains that 'twas for love of him she did the deed he bids her begone to her chamberwomen.

Finally she turns on him with the threat "Who of us calls down the lightning on his head let him beware the hurt that lurks within the forked levin's flame," she leaves him. Left alone, his heart goes forth to her and he calls her back, but soon her voice is heard without, saying, "This way fled my husband's murderer." Soldiers enter, and Guido is arrested, the blood-stained knife being taken from him.

The fourth act is laid in the hall of justice. The Duchess has accused Guido of the murder. He will not defend himself though Moranzone, who has recognised the dagger as the Duchess's, urges him to do so. Guido tells his evil genius that he himself did the deed. He then begs leave of the Justiciar to let him name the guilty one who slew the Duke, but Beatrice, who is fearful he will accuse her, urges that he shall not be allowed speech. A lengthy wrangle takes place between her, the judges, and Moranzone, and the court retires to consider the point. During the interval, the accused holds conference with the Cardinal, who will only hear him in the Confessional. Beatrice tells him, "An thou dost

meet my husband in Purgatory with a blood-red star over his heart, tell him I send you to bear him company." When at last the judges return they decide that Guido may have speech. Beatrice, who has arranged for a horse to be in waiting that it may convey her to Venice, endeavours to leave the court, but is prevented. At last Guido speaks and confesses to the murder. He is condemned to death, and is led forth as Beatrice, calling out his name, "throws wide her arms and rushes across the stage towards him."

The last act takes place in the prison. Guido is asleep, and Beatrice, wearing a cloak and mask, enters to him. By wearing these and using her ring of State she hopes he will be enabled to escape. Presently she drinks the poison which, as he is of noble birth, has been placed near him and when he awakes a reconciliation takes place between them. It is too late, the poison has begun to work. "Oh, Beatrice, thy mouth wears roses that do defy Death," exclaims Guido, and later on — "Who sins for love, sins not," to which Beatrice replies, "I have sinned, and yet mayhap shall I be forgiven. I have loved much." They kiss each other for the first time in this act, and in a final spasm she expires, and he, snatching the dagger from her belt, stabs himself as the executioner enters.

The play was read for copyright purposes in March, 1907, by an amateur dramatic society connected with St James's Church, Hampstead Road, Mr George Alexander, lending his theatre for the purpose. It has been produced, but without much success, in America by Miss Gale and the late Lawrence Barrett, and in 1904 at one of the leading theatres in Hamburg. The German production was, however, marred by a series of unfortunate incidents, so that it can hardly be held to have been a fair test of the merits of the play. The Guido had a severe cold, and during Beatrice's long speech in the last act, when he is supposed to be asleep, kept on spoiling the situation by repeated sneezes, while the Duchess herself was uncertain of her words. On the third night the Cardinal went mad on the stage and had to be taken off to an asylum.

"The Duchess of Padua" is much more a play for the study than the stage, although replete with dramatic possibilities, for its gloomy character would always militate against its success in this country. The plot is finely elaborated, and yet perfectly clear. The characterisation is keenly aware of the value of contrast in art and packed with a psychology which, buried as it is, nevertheless is just and accurate. No one can read the truly poetical dialogue with its stately cadence and rich volume

of sound without being moved by the dignity of tragedy, and what blemishes there may be are more due to inexperience than to any departure from the ideals in art that the author had set up for himself.

“VERA, OR THE NIHILISTS”

AND now in the survey of the Romantic Dramas we come to a play totally different from any other work of the author's—"Vera, or the Nihilists."

This is a melodrama pure and simple, the action taking place in Russia in 1795. It is described as "A Drama in a prologue and four acts," and was written in 1881. Badly produced and acted in America it was printed for private circulation.

The dramatis personæ are :

PERSONS IN THE PROLOGUE

PETER SABOUROFF (an Innkeeper).
VERA SABOUROFF (his Daughter).
MICHAEL (a Peasant).
COLONEL KOTEMKIN.

PERSONS IN THE PLAY

IVAN THE CZAR.
PRINCE PAUL MARALOFFSKI (Prime Minister of Russia).
PRINCE PETROVITCH.
COUNT ROUVALOFF.
MARQUIS DE POIVRARD.
BARON RAFF.
GENERAL KOTEMKIN.
A PAGE.

Nihilists

PETER TCHERNAVITCH, President of the Nihilists.

MICHAEL.

ALEXIS IVANACIEVITCH, known as a Student of Medicine.

PROFESSOR MARFA.

VERA SABOUROFF.

Soldiers, Conspirators, etc.

Scene, Moscow. Time, 1800.

The plot is briefly as follows :—

Dmitri Sabouroff, the son of an innkeeper, is, with other prisoners, on his way to an exile in Siberia to which he has been sentenced for participation in Nihilist conspiracies. The band of prisoners in its melancholy progress halts at the paternal inn. Dmitri is recognised by his sister Vera, and manages to pass her a piece of paper on which is written the address of the Nihilist centre, together with the form of oath used on joining. Then the old innkeeper recognises his son and tries to get to him as the prisoners are being marched off. The colonel in charge of the detachment (Kotemkin), closes the door on him and the old man falls senseless to the ground. A peasant admirer of Vera's (Michael) kneels down and tends the stricken father while Vera recites the oath: "To strangle whatever nature is in me; neither to love nor to be loved; neither to pity nor to be pitied; neither to marry nor to be given in marriage, till the end is come." This tableau ends the prologue.

In the first act the Nihilists are assembled at their secret meeting place and are anxiously waiting the return of Vera, who has gone to a ball at the Grand Duke's to "see the Czar and all his cursed brood face to face."

Amongst the conspirators is a young student of medicine, Alexis, who has incurred the suspicions of Vera's admirer, Michael, the most uncompromising of the revolutionists. Vera returns with the news that martial law is to be proclaimed. She is in love with Alexis and reproves him for running the risk of being present. Meanwhile, Michael and the President confer together. Michael proposes to don the uniform of the Imperial Guard, make his way into the courtyard of the palace, and shoot the Czar as he attends a council to be held in a room, the exact location of which he has learnt from Alexis. He has followed Alexis and seen him enter the palace, but has not seen the young man come out again though he had waited all night upon the watch.

Vera defends Alexis whom the conspirators wish to kill. Suddenly soldiers are heard outside, the conspirators resume their masks as Kotemkin and his men enter. In reply to his inquiries Vera informs him that they are a company of strolling players. He orders her to unmask. Alexis steps forward, removes his mask, and proclaims himself to be the Czarevitch!

The conspirators fear he will betray them, but he backs up Vera's tale as to their being strolling players, gives the officer to understand that he has an affair of gallantry on hand with Vera, and with a caution to the General dismisses him and his men. The curtain comes down, as, turning to the Nihilists, he exclaims, "Brothers, you trust me now!"

The second act is laid in the Council Chamber, where the various councillors are assembled, including the cynical Prime Minister, Prince Paul Maraloffski. Presently the Czarevitch enters, followed later by the Czar, whose fears Prince Paul has worked on to induce him to proclaim martial law. He is about to sign the document when the Czarevitch intervenes with a passionate appeal for the people and their rights, and finally proclaims himself a Nihilist. His father orders his arrest, and his orders are about to be carried out when a shot is heard from without and the Czar, who has thrown open the window, falls mortally wounded, and dies, denouncing his son as his murderer.

The third act takes place in the Nihilists' meeting place. Alexis has been proclaimed Czar, and has dismissed his father's evil genius, Prince Paul. The passwords are given and it is discovered that there is a stranger present. He unmasks, and proves to be no other than Prince Paul, who desires to become a Nihilist and re-

venge himself for his dismissal. Alexis has not obeyed the summons to the meeting, and in spite of Vera's protests is sentenced to death. The implacable Michael reminds her of her brother's fate and of her oath. She steels her heart and demands to draw with the others for the honour of carrying out the sentence on Alexis. It falls to her, and it is arranged that she shall make her way to the Czar's bedchamber that night, Paul having provided the key and the password, and stab him in his sleep. Once she has carried out her mission she is to throw out the bloodstained dagger to her fellow-conspirators, who will be waiting outside, as a signal that the Czar has been assassinated.

The fourth act is set in the antechamber of the Czar's private room, where the various ministers are assembled discussing the Czar and his plans of reform (he has already dismissed his guards and ordered the release of all political prisoners).

Alexis enters and listens to their conversation. Stepping forward he dismisses them all, depriving them of their fortunes and estates. Left alone he falls asleep and Vera, entering, raises her hand to stab him, when he awakes and seizes her arm. He tells her he has only accepted the crown that she should share it with him. Vera realises that she loves him and that she has broken her oath. A love scene follows. Midnight strikes, the conspirators are heard clamouring in the streets.

Vera stabs herself, throws the dagger out of the window, and in answer to Alexis's agonised, "What have you done?" replies with her dying breath, "I have saved Russia."

The play, as I have already said, is quite different from any other of Wilde's, and in reading it one cannot help regretting that he did not turn some of his attention and devote a portion of his great talents to the reform of English melodrama. He might have founded a strong, virile, and healthy dramatic school, and by so doing raised the standard of the popular everyday play in this country. Nevertheless, that "Vera" was not a success when produced is not to be wondered at, apart from the fact of its having been vilely acted. Pure melodrama, especially, despite a very general idea to the contrary, requires an acquaintance with technique and stage mechanism that is only obtainable after many years of practice. At this period the author had not enjoyed this practice in technique. Nevertheless, the play is essentially dramatic and had Mr Wilde at this early time in his dramatic career called in the assistance of some experienced actor or stage-manager, with a very little alteration a perfectly workmanlike drama could have been made out of it. The prologue and the first act could have been run into one act divided into two separate scenes. More incident and action

could have been introduced into Act Two and some of the dialogue curtailed. Acts Three and Four want very little revision, and it would have been easy to introduce one or two female characters and perhaps a second love interest. Some light-comedy love scenes would have helped to redeem the gloom of the play and afforded a valuable contrast to the intensity of the hero and heroine in their amorous converse.

The dialogue is crisp and vigorous and the language at times of rare beauty. It is a pity that such a work should be wasted, and it is to be hoped that some manager will have the astuteness and ability to produce it in a good acting form. The experiment would certainly be worth trying.

The play as a whole is certainly not one of its author's finest productions. As has been said, it was written before he had mastered stage technique and learned those secrets of dramaturgy which in later years raised him to such a pinnacle of fame as a dramatic author. Yet it can be said of it with perfect confidence that it is far and away superior to nine-tenths of modern, and successful, melodramatic plays. Indeed, whenever we discuss or criticise even the less important works of Oscar Wilde we are amazed at their craftsmanship and delighted with their achievement. The most unconsidered trifles from his pen stand out among similar pro-

ductions as the moon among stars, and his genius is so great that work for which other writers would expect and receive the highest praise in comparison with *his* greatest triumphs almost fails to excite more than a fugitive and passing admiration.

“THE FLORENTINE TRAGEDY”

AN interesting story attaches to “The Florentine Tragedy,” a short play by Wilde which was produced on 18th June 1906, by the Literary Theatre Club.

The history of the play was related by Mr Robert Ross to a representative of *The Tribune* newspaper.

“The play was written,” he said, “for Mr George Alexander, but for certain reasons was not produced by him. In April 1895, Mr Wilde requested me to go to his house and take possession of all his unpublished manuscripts. He had been declared a bankrupt, and I reached the house just before the bailiffs entered. Of course, the author’s letters and manuscripts of two other unpublished plays and the enlarged version of ‘The Portrait of Mr. W. H.’ upon which I knew he was engaged—had mysteriously disappeared. Someone had been there before me.

“The thief was never discovered, nor have we even seen ‘The Florentine Tragedy,’ the ‘Mr W. H.’ story, or one of the other plays, ‘The Duchess of Padua’—since that time. Curiously enough, the manuscript of the third play, a tragedy somewhat on the lines of ‘Salomé,’ was

discovered by a friend of Mr Wilde's in a second-hand bookshop in London, in 1897. It was sent to the author in Paris, and was not heard of again. After his death in 1900 it could not be found. With regard to 'The Duchess of Padua,' the loss was not absolute, for this play, a five-act tragedy, had previously been performed in America, and I possessed the 'prompt' copy.

"To return to 'The Florentine Tragedy.' I had heard portions of it read, and was acquainted with the incidents and language, but for a long time I gave it up as lost. Then, after Mr Wilde's death, I had occasion to sort a mass of letters and papers which were handed to me by his solicitors. Among them I found loose sheets containing the draft of a play which I recognised as 'The Florentine Tragedy.' By piecing these together I was able to reconstruct a considerable portion of the play. The first five pages had gone, and there was another page missing, but some 400 lines of blank verse remained. Now the introductory scene of the single act of which the play consists has been rewritten by Mr Sturge Moore, and the 'Tragedy' will be presented to an English audience for the first time at the King's Hall, Covent Garden, next Sunday.

"On the same occasion the Literary Theatre Club will give a performance of Mr Wilde's 'Salomé,' which, as you know, cannot be given publicly in this country, owing to the Biblica

derivation of the subject. But 'Salomé' has been popular for years in Germany, and it has also been played in Sweden, Russia, Italy, and Holland."

It seems that "The Florentine Tragedy" has also been played with great success in Germany. It was translated by Dr Max Meyerfeld, and was produced first at Leipsic, and afterwards at Hamburg and Berlin. According to Mr Ross, "The Florentine Tragedy" promises to become almost as popular with German playgoers as "Salomé" is now.

"The Florentine Tragedy," as already indicated, is a brief one-act drama. There are only three characters: an old Florentine merchant, his beautiful wife, and her lover. The simple plot may be briefly indicated. The merchant, arriving suddenly at his home after a short absence, finds his wife and his rival in her affections together at supper. He makes a pretence at first of being profoundly courteous, and the ensuing conversation (as need hardly be said) is pointed, epigrammatic, and witty. Then the old man gradually leads up to what, it becomes obvious, had been his fixed purpose from the beginning. He draws the lover into a duel. This takes place in the presence of the wife, who, indeed, holds aloft a torch in order that the two swordsmen may fight the more easily. The contest waxes fiercer, and the swords are exchanged for daggers. The

wife casts the torch to the ground as the two men close with each other, and the younger one falls mortally wounded. The ending is dramatic. The infuriated husband turns to his shrinking wife and exclaims, "Now for the other!" The woman, in mingled remorse and fear, says, "Why did you not tell me you were so strong?" And the husband rejoins, "Why did you not tell me you were so beautiful?" As the curtain descends, the couple, thus strangely reconciled, fall into each other's arms.

The character of outstanding importance, of course, is that of the old merchant. According to those who have studied the play, he is a strikingly effective figure, most cleverly and delightfully drawn. In the opinion of Mr Moore the part is one that would have fitted Sir Henry Irving excellently well. The action of the drama occupies less than half-an-hour,

In this connection it may be well to recall the testimony of an Irish publisher quoted by Mr Sherard in his "Life of Oscar Wilde." This gentleman attended the sale of the author's effects in Tite Street, and in a room upstairs found the floor thickly strewn with letters addressed to the quondam owner of the house and a great quantity of his manuscripts. He concluded that as the various pieces of furniture had been carried downstairs to be sold their contents had been emptied out on to the floor of this

room. Presently a broker's man came up to him and inquired what he was doing in the room, and on his replying that finding the door open he had walked in, the man said, "then somebody has broken open the lock, because I locked the door myself." This gentleman surmises that it was from this room that various manuscripts that have never been recovered were stolen !

When the piece was produced by the Literary Theatre Club it suffered from inadequate acting. Mr George Ingleton was quite overweighted by the part of Simone, the Florentine merchant. It is a part that requires an Irving to carry it through, or, at anyrate, an actor of great experience, and for anyone else to attempt it is a piece of daring which can only result in failure.

It is curious that the denouement, which was so severely handled by the critics when the play was produced in Berlin, was the part of the piece that seemed most to impress an English audience. The epigram and the praises of strength and beauty provoked no protest or dissatisfaction, as those who had seen the German production expected they would, nor was the audience in the least shocked when the wife holds the torch for her husband and lover to fight, nor when, at the close of the encounter, she purposely throws it down. This, of course, is the unlooked-for climax of the piece, and the dramatic character of the situation completely saved it.

“THE WOMAN COVERED WITH JEWELS”

FINALLY we have arrived at what must always be the most tantalising of all Wilde's plays because the MS. has been lost and very little is known about it. It had for title “The Woman Covered With Jewels.” The only copy of it known to exist, a small quarto book of ruled paper in the author's own handwriting, was presumably stolen with the copies of “The Incomparable and Ingenious History of Mr W. H. Being the true Secret of Shakespeare's Sonnets, now for the first time here fully set forth,” and “The Florentine Tragedy,” at the time of the Tite Street sale. But little is known about the play—a very few privileged persons having been favoured with a perusal of it, and the only information the public have been able to gather about it is from an article by a well-known book-lover that appeared in a weekly paper. I myself have not been able to discover any further information.

The play was in prose and, like “Salomé,” was a tragedy in one act. It was written about 1896.

According to the writer of the article referred to, it was “presented by its author to a charm-

ing and cultured Mayfair lady, well known in London Society." He goes on to say that she allowed a few well-known *littérateurs* to peruse it, but that the manuscript is now lost and that he has not succeeded in tracing a second copy anywhere. There seems to be some confusion here, for if this were the only copy it could not have been stolen from the Tite Street sale, as, according to the biography, was the case. One thing, at anyrate, appears certain, and that is that there is no copy in existence, or rather—for if it was stolen it must be in someone's possession—available at the present moment. It would be interesting to know how the lady to whom the book was presented came to lose it. Perhaps she herself destroyed it at the period when so many of his friends were so anxious to conceal all traces of their friendship with its author. Again, the MS. may only have been lent her, and may have been returned by her to Wilde before the crash. At anyrate, it seems incredible that he should have parted with the manuscript without keeping even a rough copy. The point needs elucidation.

According to the writer of the article—"There is little doubt that the lost tragedy by Wilde was intended originally—like 'Salomé'—for Sarah Bernhardt. It contains a part somewhat like her *Izeijl*. The period of the play is that of the second century after Christ, a century

of heresy and manifold gospels that had made the Church of the day a thing divided by sects and scarred with schisms. Fairly vigorous Christian churches existed at Athens and Corinth. From one of these there seceded a most holy man. He withdrew into the desert, and at the time the play begins was dwelling in a cave 'whose mouth opened upon the tawny sand of the desert like that of a huge lion.' His reputation for holiness had gone forth to many cities. One day there came to his cave a beautiful courtesan, covered with jewels. She had broken her journey in order to see and hear the wonderful priest who had striven against the devil in the desert. He sees the strange, beautiful intruder, and, speaking of the faith that was within him, tries to win one more convert to its kingdom, glory, and power. She listens as Thais listened to Paphnutius. The hermit's eloquence sways her reason, while her exquisite beauty of face and form troubles his constancy. She speaks in turn and presses him to leave his hermit home and come with her to the city. There he may preach to better effect the gospel of the Kingdom of God. 'The city is more wicked than the desert,' she says, in effect.

"While they are talking two men drew near and gazed upon the unusual scene. 'Surely it must be a king's daughter,' said one. 'She has

beautiful hair like a king's daughter, and, behold, she is covered with jewels.'

"At last she mounts her litter and departs, and the men follow her. 'The priest has been troubled, tortured by her beauty. He recalls the melting glory of her eyes, the softly curving cheeks, the red humid mouth. Recalls, too, the wooing voice that was like rippling wind-swept water. Her hair fell like a golden garment; she was, indeed, covered with jewels.

"Evening draws near and there comes to the mouth of the cave a man who says that robbers have attacked and murdered a great lady who was travelling near that day. They show the horror-struck priest a great coil of golden hair besmeared with blood. Here the tragedy ends.

"One sees that 'The Woman Covered With Jewels' is an outcome, and one more expression, of that literary movement that gave us 'Salambo,' 'Thais,' 'Aphrodite,' 'Imperial Purple,' and many more remarkable works of a school, or group of writers, who, wearied of the *jeune*, the effete, and much else, have sought solace for their literary conscience in a penman's reconquest of antiquity. Probably the old-world story of Paphnutius and Thais inspired the tragedy and Maeterlinck's plays suggested its technique. Who can know? Assuredly its tragic picture of devotion, passion, cupidity, and

murder would thrill and enthrall those who could know it better than in this imperfect portrayal. 'The Woman Covered With Jewels' is worthy of the pen that wrote 'Salome,' and 'The Sphinx.'

"Yet it is lost!"

PART IV

THE WRITER OF FAIRY STORIES

THE FAIRY STORIES

A LITTLE girl who had kept her fifth birthday joyously in the garden of her father's home went on the morrow to the great and grimy city which was nearest to it. We were to visit the bazaars and buy books and toys. As we went through the great square in which the Town Hall stands the small hand in mine told me that here was something which we must stay to consider. We stood at the base of the statue which the citizens had raised in memory of a statesman's endeavour and success. She looked steadily and long at the figure of which the noble head redeemed the vulgar insignificance of costume and posture. "What did this man do, uncle?" she asked, "that he has been turned into stone?" I was dreadfully startled, for the horrid suspicion darted through my mind that my little niece had remembered my talk with her father about modern sculpture, and at five years old had already begun to pose. "Of course, it had to be stone not salt in England," she went on to say, and I was reassured; she at least was remembering Lot's wife.

It was in the later spring of 1888, and when the evening post brought me fresh from the press "The Happy Prince and Other Tales,"

the first story told me that Oscar Wilde, of whom men, even then, had many things sinister and strange to say, had yet within him the heart of a little child.

“High above the city, on a tall column, stood the statue of the Happy Prince.”

“When I was alive and had a human heart I did not know what tears were, for I lived in the Palace of Sans Souci, where sorrow is not allowed to enter. In the daytime I played with my companions in the garden, and in the evening I led the dance in the great Hall. Round the garden ran a very lofty wall, but I never cared to ask what lay beyond it, everything about me was so beautiful. My courtiers called me the Happy Prince, and happy indeed I was, if pleasure be happiness, so I lived and so I died. And now that I am dead they have set me up here so high that I can see all the ugliness and all the misery of my city, and though my heart is made of lead yet I cannot choose but weep.”

Here, strange to say, is the note of pathos which we hear again and again in the volume of fairy stories which many men look upon as Oscar Wilde's best and most characteristic prose work. Time after time they make me murmur Vergil's untranslatable line *sunt lachrymæ rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt*.

The felicity of expression is exquisite, and an opulent imagination lavishes its treasures in every

story. Our author has come into full possession of his sovereignty of words and every sentence has its carefully considered, yet spontaneous charm. Nevertheless, Oscar Wilde makes the Linnet his mouthpiece in the fourth story "The Devoted Friend." "'The fact is, that I told him a story with a moral.' 'Ah, that is always a very dangerous thing to do,' said the Duck—and I quite agreed with her."

Dangerous though it is, Oscar Wilde essayed the endeavour. I do not think that children would easily detect that *amari aliquid* which makes the fairy stories fascinating to minds that are mature, and I am sure that many little ones have revelled in the Swallow's stories of what he had seen in strange lands when he told "the Happy Prince of the red ibises, who stand in long rows on the banks of the Nile and catch gold fish in their beaks; of the Sphinx, who is as old as the world itself, and lives in the desert, and knows everything; of the merchants who walk slowly by the side of their camels, and carry amber beads in their hands; of the King of the Mountains of the Moon, who is as black as ebony, and worships a large crystal; of the great green snake that sleeps in a palm-tree, and has twenty priests to feed it with honey cakes; and of the pygmies who sail over a big lake on large flat leaves, and are always at war with the butterflies."

I suppose it would shock the authorities of the Education Department at Whitehall if it were suggested that the children in the Elementary Day Schools should have for their reading lesson, sometimes, the volume of "The Happy Prince and Other Tales, by Oscar Wilde, illustrated by Walter Crane and Jacomb Hood"—but I think the starved and stunted imaginations of the children in the great, cruel cities would revive and grow if this could be done.

But perhaps it would have to be an expurgated edition. The sad consciousness of, and stern satire on, our social system might remain, the children would take no hurt, and the weary school teachers would be glad to hear and to read a children's fairy tale, which sets the student thinking and makes the more worldly man consider his ways. But if I had the editing of the book I would leave out here and there a sentence.

"‘Bring me the two most precious things in the city,’ said God to one of His angels; and the angel brought him the leaden heart and the dead bird.

"‘You have rightly chosen,’ said God, ‘for in my garden of Paradise this little bird shall sing for evermore, and in my city of gold the Happy Prince shall praise me.’” The children would not like this, for in their ears sound often the severe words of Sinai, “The Lord will not hold him

guiltless that taketh His name in vain," and I, who delight in the beautiful prose poems, feel that here the dead artist was not at his best.

Some have said that there are no fairy stories like Oscar Wilde's, but Hans Andersen had written before him, and Charles Kingsley's "Water Babies" was published long before "The Happy Prince." The Dane managed to touch on things Divine without a discord, and Charles Kingsley's satire was not less keen than Oscar's, but he could point his moral without intruding very sacred things into his playful pages, and I wish that the two last sentences of "The Happy Prince" could be erased.

It is the gorgeous colour and the vivid sonorous words that charm us most. It is easy to analyse these sentences and to note how pearls and pomegranates, and the hyacinth blossom, and the pale ivory, and the crimson of the ruby, again and again glow on the pages like the illuminations of the mediæval missal; but each story has its own peculiar charm.

"The Nightingale and the Rose" is a tale full of passion and tenderness, and sad in the sorrow of wasted sympathy and unrequited love.

"Surely Love is a wonderful thing. It is more precious than emeralds, and dearer than fine opals. Pearls and pomegranates cannot buy it, nor is it set forth in the market-place. It may

not be purchased of the merchants, nor can it be weighed out in the balance of gold."

I can fancy Oscar Wilde writing thus in the happy days of his early married life in Chelsea, in the little study where his best work was done, whilst memories of the Chapel of Magdalen murmured in his brain, and he heard again the surpliced scholar reading from the lectern the praise of wisdom which he transmuted into the praise of love which was not wise. "It cannot be gotten for gold, neither shall silver be weighed for the price thereof. It cannot be valued with the gold of Ophir, with the precious onyx, or the sapphire. The gold and the crystal cannot equal it: and the exchange of it shall not be for jewels or fine gold. No mention shall be made of coral or of pearls: for the price of wisdom is above rubies. The topaz of Ethiopia shall not equal it, neither shall it be valued with pure gold."

Throughout "The Song of the Nightingale" there is a reminiscence of that Song of Solomon which Wilde told a fellow-prisoner he had always loved.

"Many waters cannot quench love; neither can the floods drown it: if a man would give all the substance of his house for love, it would be utterly contemned."

In "The Selfish Giant" another note is sounded. As we read it we pass into the mediæval age, and we think of the story of Christopher.

The giant keeps the garden to himself and the children that played in it are banished, and thenceforward its glories are gone. In the garden of the Selfish Giant it was still winter. The birds did not care to sing in it as there were no children, and the trees forgot to blossom. The Snow covered up the grass with his great white cloak, and the Frost painted all the trees silver, but anon there came a child who wept as he wandered in the desolated garden, and the Selfish Giant's heart melted; once again the children's voices are heard and the garden flourishes as it did before, and the Giant grows old and watches from his chair the children at their play. "I have many beautiful flowers," he said, "but the children are the most beautiful flowers of it all," till at last the grey old Giant finds again in his garden the child who had first touched his hard heart—"but when he came quite close his face grew red with anger, and he said, 'Who hath dared to wound thee?' for on the palms of the child's hands were the prints of two nails, and the prints of two nails were on the little feet. 'Who hath dared to wound thee?' cried the Giant, 'tell me, that I may take my big sword and slay him.' 'Nay,' answered the child, 'but these are the wounds of love.'"

"The Devoted Friend" is altogether in another vein. As the first story is fragrant of the East and the second mediæval in its memories, so the

third is Teutonic, and "Hans and the Miller's Friendship" reminds us of the Brothers Grimm. Now that every child has the chance of reading the German fairy stories, Oscar Wilde's tale will be compared with theirs, but I think the children will like this one best for the simple reason that, being written in exquisite English, nothing that has passed through the perils of translation can have its charm. Children are wonderful, because perfectly unconscious, critics of style.

It is doubtful if readers will enjoy "The Remarkable Rocket" as they will the other stories. The modern *milieu* intrudes here and there. The satire is keen and there are some clever epigrams. The Russian Princess "had driven all the way from Finland in a sledge drawn by six reindeer which was shaped like a great golden swan, and between the swan's wings lay the little princess herself"—and we think that we are going to enjoy again the atmosphere of Watteau, and are a little disappointed when we find our author saying, "He was something of a politician, and had always taken a prominent part in the local elections, or he knew the proper Parliamentary expressions to use." And the story, alas! will suggest over and over again painful thoughts which I would keep at a distance when I read these other lovely tales. Was not this sentence of evil omen? "'However, I don't care a bit," said the Rocket. 'Genius like mine

is sure to be appreciated some day,' and he sank down a little deeper into the mud." And the last sentence of all is terribly sinister. " 'I knew I should create a sensation,' gasped the Rocket, and he went out."

"The House of Pomegranates" was published in 1891, and is dedicated to Constance Mary Wilde. Here, in a volume which the author frankly calls a volume of "Beautiful Tales," is a very stern indictment of the social system which, in his essay "The Soul of Man," Oscar Wilde had so powerfully denounced. We know how profoundly that essay has influenced the minds of men in every country in Europe. Translated into every tongue it has taught the oppressed to resent the callous cruelty of capital, but I doubt if its author was altogether as earnest as he seems. Here, in the story of the young King, we have a lighter touch. It is as though the writer hesitated between two paths. In the year 1895 the wrong path had been taken if we may trust the record of a conversation which took place in that year.

"To be a supreme artist," said he, "one must first be a supreme individualist."

"You talk of Art," said I, "as though there were nothing else in the world worth living for."

"For me," said he sadly, "there is nothing else."

But when Oscar Wilde dedicated "The House of Pomegranates" to his wife the love of Beauty and the love of humankind still seemed to go together.

The young King is possessed with a passion for beauty. The son of the old King's daughter, by a secret marriage, his childhood and early youth have been obscure, and he comes into his kingdom suddenly. We see him in the Palace where are gathered rich stores of all rare and beautiful things and his love for them is an instinct. The author in some exquisite pages tells us of the glories of the King's house. Here, as in the other book of which I have written, the mind of the reader is helped to realise how beautiful luxury may be. I must quote the description of the young King's sleeping-chamber—"The walls were hung with rich tapestries representing the Triumph of Beauty. A large press, inlaid with agate and lapis lazuli, fitted one corner, and facing the window stood a curiously wrought cabinet with lacquer panels of powdered and mosaiced gold, on which were placed some delicate goblets of Venetian glass and a cup of dark veined onyx. Pale poppies were brodered on the silk coverlet of the bed, as though they had fallen from the tired hands of sleep, and tall reeds of fluted ivory bare up the velvet canopy, from which great tufts of ostrich plumes sprang like white foam, to the

pallid silver of the fretted ceiling. A laughing Narcissus in green bronze held a polished mirror above its head. On the table stood a flat bowl of amethyst."

But on the eve of the coronation, the King dreams a dream. He is borne to the weavers' quarter and marks their weary toil, and the weaver of his own coronation robe has terrible things to tell him.

"In war," answered the weaver, "the strong make slaves of the weak, and in peace the rich make slaves of the poor. We must work to live, and they give us such mean wages that we die. We toil for them all day long, and they heap up gold in their coffers, and our children fade away before their time, and the faces of those we love become hard and evil. We tread out the grapes, and another drinks the wine. We sow the corn, and our own board is empty. We have chains though no eye beholds them; and are slaves, though men call us free."

"Sic vos non nobis!" The artist in words is still haunted by his master Vergil's verses, and he had not listened to Ruskin all in vain. The Pagan point of view is not that which prevailed in those happy months when "The House of Pomegranates" was written. Perhaps Ruskin's socialism made no very deep impression, but Christian Art had its message once for Oscar Wilde.

The young King sees in his dreams the toil of the weaver, and the diver, and of those who dig for the red rubies, and when he wakes he puts his pomp aside. In vain do his courtiers chide him, in vain do those whom he pities tell him that his way of redress is wrong and that "out of the luxury of the rich cometh the life of the poor."

The King asks, "Are not the rich and the poor brothers?"

"Ay," answered the man in the crowd, "and the name of the rich brother is Cain." So the young King comes to the Cathedral for his coronation clad in his leathern tunic and the rough sheepskin cloak of other days, and when the wise and worldly Bishop has told him in decorous words even the same as his own courtiers said.

"Sayest thou that in this House?" said the young King, and he strode past the Bishop, and climbed up the steps of the altar, and stood before the Image of the Christ."

But I must not be tempted to continue the quotation of this lovely story, and will only give its closing words—

"And the young King came down from the high altar, and passed home through the midst of the people. But no man dared look upon his face, for it was like the face of an angel."

Here once more is the music of the lectern

which an Oxford man of years ago cannot forget, and I wonder if this story of the young King was not written some time before those others which complete the book.

“The Birthday of the Infanta” does not give me the same delight. It is, of course, clever, as all was that Oscar Wilde ever touched, but it is cruel whilst it accuses cruelty. And now and then we have a sentence or a phrase which seems to have escaped revision. The story of the little dwarf who made sport for the princess and whose heart was broken when he found that she was pleased, not by his dances, but by his deformity, is not like its predecessor in the volume, and the picture of “the little dwarf lying on the ground and beating the floor with his clenched hands” did not need the awkward addition “in the most fantastic and exaggerated manner.” But every poet, of course, *aliquando dormitat*, and I would rather appreciate than criticise.

Two more stories complete this beautiful book and I think I have not said yet how beautiful the type and binding and engravings are of this edition of 1891 in which I am reading. If ever it is reprinted it should have still the same sumptuous setting forth.

Wilde himself described the *format* of the book in the following passage:—“Mr Shannon is the drawer of the dreams, and Mr Ricketts is the subtle and fantastic decorator. Indeed, it is to

Mr Ricketts that the entire decorative design of the book is due, from the selection of the type and the placing of the ornamentation, to the completely beautiful cover that encloses the whole.

The artistic beauty of the cover resides in the delicate tracing, arabesques, and massing of many coral-red lines on a ground of white ivory, the colour effect culminating in certain high gilt notes, and being made still pleasurable by the overlapping band of moss-green cloth that holds the book together."

"The Fisherman and his Soul," recalls many stories and is very weird in its conception. We think of Undine and of Peter Schmeidel and his shadow; and again there is a reminiscence of "The Arabian Nights." Yet once more it is the old burden of the song "Love is better than wisdom, and more precious than riches, and fairer than the feet of the daughters of men. The fires cannot destroy it, nor can the waters quench it." But in the story there is seen distinctly the strong attraction which the Ritual of The Catholic Church had for Oscar Wilde. Those who have read that fine poem, "Rome Unvisited," which even the saintly recluse of the Oratory at Edgbaston could praise, will understand how in the story of the "Fisherman and his Soul" it is written.

"The Priest went up to the chapel, that he

might show to the people the wounds of the Lord, and speak to them about the wrath of God. And when he had robed himself with his robes, and entered in and bowed himself upon the altar, he saw that the altar was covered with strange flowers that never had been seen before, and after that he had opened the tabernacle, and incensed the monstrance that was in it, and shown the fair wafer to the people, and hid it again behind the veils, he began to speak to the people."

And now I come to "The Star-Child—inscribed to Miss Margot Tennant."

"He was white and delicate like swan ivory, and his curls were like the rings of the daffodil. His lips, also, were like the petals of a red flower, and his eyes were like violets by a river of pure water, and his body like the narcissus of a field where the mower comes not." But his heart was hard and his soul was selfish, and his evil ways wrought mischief all around; so bitter sorrow fell upon him and his comeliness departed, and in pain and grief he was purged from his sin.

This last is indeed a beautiful story, and not once is there sounded the mocking note of cynical disdain of men. If one had taken up this tale and known not whose pen had traced it, he would not hesitate to place it in his children's hands.

Is it not good to think that tenderness and humility and patience are seen herein to be more beautiful than all the precious things which are loved so ardently by the artistic mind? I have shown, I hope, that in both of these exquisite volumes, it may be seen that Oscar Wilde had visions sometimes of the celestial city where the angels of the little children do always behold the face of the Father. And if, as other chapters of this volume may seem to show, the vision splendid died away and faded all too soon, purgatorial pain came to the author, as to the star-child in his story, and he who could build for his soul a lordly pleasure house, and was driven forth from it, may enter it again when he has purged his sin.

PART V

THE POET

POEMS

IF a keynote were wanted to Oscar Wilde's verse it might be found in a couple of stanzas by the poet whose work perhaps had the greatest share in moulding his ideas and fashioning his style. Charles Baudelaire, with all his love of the terrible and the morbid, was an incomparable stylist, and in these lines has almost formulated a creed of art.

“La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles ;
L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.

Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent
Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité,
Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,
Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.”

We can picture to ourselves the young Oxford student studying these lines over and over again till they had become part and parcel of himself.

Wilde himself has left it on record that he “cannot imagine anyone with the smallest pretensions to culture preferring a dexterously turned triolet to a fine imaginative ballad.” In the majority of his poems, the beauties of nature, flowers, the song of birds and the music of running water are introduced either incidentally or

as the *leit motif*. In fact, he was responsible for the dictum that what English poetry has to fear is not the fascination of dainty metre or delicate form, but the predominance of the intellectual spirit over the spirit of beauty.

That the expression of the beautiful need not necessarily be simple was one of his earliest contentions. "Are simplicity and directness of utterance," he asks, "absolute essentials for poetry?" and proceeds to answer his own question. "I think not. They may be admirable for the drama, admirable for all those imitative forms of literature that claim to mirror life in its externals and its accidents, admirable for quiet narrative, admirable in their place; but their place is not everywhere. Poetry has many modes of music; she does not blow through one pipe alone. Directness of utterance is good, but so is the subtle recasting of thought into a new and delightful form. Simplicity is good, but complexity, mystery, strangeness, symbolism, obscurity even, these have their value. Indeed, properly speaking, there is no such thing as Style; there are merely styles, that is all."

There we have a clear, concise and catholic statement of his literary creed, and none other was to be expected from one to whom Baudelaire, Poe, Keats, and Rossetti were so many masters whose influence was to be carefully cultivated and whose methods were worthy of

imitation and study. His views on the subject of simplicity in verse should be read by all who desire to understand his method and do justice to his work.

“We are always apt to think,” he wrote, “that the voices which sang at the dawn of poetry were simpler, fresher, and more natural than ours, and that the world which the early poets looked at, and through which they walked, had a kind of poetical quality of its own, and could pass, almost without changing, into song. The snow lies thick now upon Olympus, and its scarp sides are bleak and barren, but once, we fancy, the white feet of the Muses brushed the dew from the anemones in the morning, and at evening came Apollo to sing to the shepherds in the vale. But in this we are merely lending to other ages what we desire, or think we desire, for our own. Our historical sense is at fault, Every century that produces poetry is, so far, an artificial century, and the work that seems to us the most natural and simple product of its time is probably the result of the most deliberate and self-conscious effort. For nature is always behind the age. It takes a great artist to be thoroughly modern.”

“Ravenna,” the poem with which Oscar Wilde won the Newdigate Prize, we find to be far above the average of such effusions, though possessing most of the faults inherent in compositions of

this kind. Grace and even force of expression are not wanting, with here and there a pure strain of sentiment and thought, and a keen appreciation of the beauties of nature. Ever and anon we come across some sentence, some *tour-nure de phrase* which might belong to his later work, as for instance—

“The crocus bed (that seems a moon of fire
Round-girdled with a purple marriage-ring).”

But for the most part the poem is rather reminiscent of “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage,” and is chiefly interesting by reason of the promise it holds forth.

The poems published in 1881 are preceded by some dedicatory verses addressed to his wife which are characterised by great daintiness and simplicity, instinct with tender affection and chivalrous homage.

“*Helas*,” which forms a sort of preface to the collection, is chiefly interesting on account of the prophetic pathos of the lines :

“Surely there was a time I might have trod
The sunlit heights, and from life’s dissonance
Struck one clear chord to reach the ears of God.”

“*Ave Imperatrix*” will come as a surprise to those unacquainted with Wilde’s works. Most people would have thought the author of “*Dorian Gray*” the last man in the world to write a stirring patriotic poem which would not be out of

place in a collection of Mr Kipling's works. A copy of *The World* containing this poem found its way to an officer in Lord Robert's force marching on Candahar, and evoked the enthusiasm and admiration of the whole mess. As a proof of the author's originality and care in the choice of similes he purposely discards the modern heraldic device of the British lion for the more correct and ancient leopards, as :

"The yellow leopards, strained and lean,
The treacherous Russian knows so well
With gaping blackened jaws are seen
Leap through the hail of screaming shell."

There is a fine swing about the metre of this verse, and the description of the leopards as "strained and lean" is a piece of word painting, a felicity of expression that it would be difficult to improve on. The whole poem is tense with patriotic fervour, nor is it wanting in exquisitely pathetic touches, as for instance—

"Pale women who have lost their lord
Will kiss the relics of the slain—
Some tarnished epaulette—some sword—
Poor toys to soothe such anguished pain."

or

"In vain the laughing girl will yearn
To greet her love with love-lit eyes :
Down in some treacherous ravine,
Clutching the flag, the dead boy lies."

That he should have written such a poem is proof conclusive of the author's extraordinary versatility, and though a comparatively early

production is worthy to rank with the finest war poems in the language.

Current events at that time attracted his pen for we find a set of verses on the death of the ill-fated Prince Imperial, a sonnet on the Bulgarian Christians, and others of a more or less patriotic character. Few of these productions, however, invite a very serious criticism. They were of the moment and for the moment, and have lost the appeal of freshness and actuality.

In "The Garden of Eros" we get a good insight into Wilde's passionate fondness for flowers, to whom they were human things with souls. Probably no other verses of the poet so well define and express this master passion of his life.

" . . . Mark how the yellow iris wearily
Leans back its throat, as though it would be kissed
By its false chamberer, the dragon-fly."

or

"And I will tell thee why the jacinth wears
Such dread embroidery of dolorous moan."

or again

"Close to a shadowy nook where half afraid
Of their own loneliness some violets lie
That will not look the gold sun in the face."

I remember a lady telling me once that she was in a London shop one day when Wilde came in and asked as a favour that a lily be taken out of the window because it looked so

tired. This looking on flowers as real live sentient things was no mere pose with him. He was thoroughly imbued with the conviction that they were possessed of feeling, and throughout his poetical work we shall find endless applications of this idea.

Of particular interest in this poem are the verses descriptive of the various poets, his contemporaries. Swinburne he alludes to most happily, as far as the neatness of phrase is concerned nothing could be better in this regard than

“And he hath kissed the lips of Proserpine
And sung the Galilean’s requiem.”

William Morris, “our sweet and simple Chaucer’s child,” appeals to him strangely. Many a summer’s day he informs us he has “lain poring on the dreamy tales his fancy weaves.” His appreciation of Morris’ verse is keen and enthusiastic.

“The little laugh of water falling down
Is not so musical, the clammy gold
Close hoarded in the tiny waxen town
Has less of sweetness in it.”

What a delicate metaphor that is, what an exquisite poet’s fancy. Not Keats himself could have surpassed the “clammy gold close hoarded in the tiny waxen town”—it is worthy to rank with some of the daintiest flights in the “Queen

Mab speech," that modern Mercutios murder so abominably.

Like every verse writer of his time Oscar Wilde had felt the wondrous influence of Rossetti, and no finer tribute to the painter could be written than the lines—

"All the World for him
A gorgeous coloured vestiture must wear,
And Sorrow take a purple diadem,
Or else be no more Sorrow, and Despair
Gild its own thorns, and Pain, like Adon, be
Even in Anguish beautiful; such is the empery which
Painters held."

There is a stately splendour about the flow of "a gorgeous coloured vestiture," and one pauses to admire the choice of the last word, and can picture the poet's delight when, like an artist in mosaic who has hit upon the stone to fill up the remaining interstice, he lighted on the word. It is essentially *le mot juste*, no other could have filled its place. So also is there a peculiar happiness in the use of "emperry." There is a volume of sound and meaning in the word that could with difficulty be surpassed.

In fact, in his choice of words Wilde always and for ever deserves the glowing words of praise that Baudelaire addressed to Theodore de Bonville—

"Vous avez prélassé votre orgueil d'architecte
Dans des constructions dont l'audace correcte
Fait voir quelle sera votre votre maturité."

And when we come to a line like—

“Against the pallid shield
Of the wan sky the almond blossoms gleam”

we realise how thoroughly the praise would be deserved, and linger lovingly on the lilting music of the words and the curious Japanese setting of the picture evolved. The poem ends on a note like the drawing in of a deep breath of country air after a prolonged sojourn in towns.

“Why soon
The woodman will be here; how we have lived this night of
June.”

In “Requiescat” quite a different note is reached. The poem was written after the death of a beloved sister; the sentiment rings true and the very simplicity of the language conveys an atmosphere of real grief that would have been entirely marred by the intrusion of any decorative or highly-coloured phrase. The choice of Saxon words alone could produce the desired effect, and the author has realised this and made use almost exclusively of that material. Nor was he ill-advised to let himself be influenced so far as the metre is concerned by Hood’s incomparable “Bridge of Sighs,” and it was not in the metre alone that he availed himself of that priceless gem of English verse—

"All her bright golden hair
Tarnished with rust,
She that was young and fair
Fallen to dust."

is obviously inspired by

"Take her up tenderly,
Lift her with care ;
Fashioned so slenderly,
Young, and so fair !"

But, on the other hand, Hood himself might well have envied the exquisite sentiment contained in—

"Speak gently, she can hear
The daisies grow."

The lines were written at Avignon, surely the place of all others, with its memories and its mediæval atmosphere, to inspire a poem, the dignity and beauty of which are largely due to the simplicity of its wording.

During this period of travel we are struck by two things. Firstly, how deeply impressed the young poet was by the mysteries of the Catholic Faith and how his indignation flamed up at the new Italian *régime* ; secondly, how apparent the influence of Rossetti is in the sonnets he then wrote.

His sympathies were all with the occupant of St Peter's chair.

"But when I knew that far away at Rome
In evil bonds a second Peter lay,
I wept to see the land so very fair."

and again

“Look southward where Rome’s desecrated town
Lies mourning for her God-anointed King!
Look heavenward! Shall God allow this thing
Not but some flame-girt Raphael shall come down,
And smite the Spoiler with the sword of pain.”

In “San Miniato” the influence of Rome upon the young man’s mind finds expression in words which might have been written by a son of the Latin Church.

“O crowned by God with thorns and pain!
Mother of Christ! O mystic wife!
My heart is weary of this life
And over sad to sing again,”

he writes, and ends with the invocation—

“O crowned by God with love and flame!
O crowned by Christ the Holy One!
O listen ere the scorching sun
Show to the world my sin and shame.”

Nor can it be wondered at that the devotion to the Madonna which forms so essential a feature of the Catholic Faith should impress his young and ardent spirit as it does nearly every artist to whom the poetic beauty of this side of It naturally appeals.

The Pope’s captivity moved him again and again to express his indignation in verse, and from his poem, “Easter Day” we can gather how deeply he was impressed both by the stately ceremonial at St Peter’s and by the sight of the

despoiled Pontiff. At this time also he seems to have been more or less yearning after a more spiritual mode of life than he has been leading, at least so one gathers from poems like "E Tenebris" in which he tells us that—

"The wine of life is spilt upon the sand,
My heart is as some famine-murdered land
Whence all good things have perished utterly
And well I know my soul in Hell must be,
If I this night before God's throne should stand."

That he had visions of a possible time when a complete change should be worked in his spiritual condition seems clear from the concluding lines of "Rome Unvisited."

"Before yon field of trembling gold
Is garnered into dusty sheaves
Or ere the autumn's scarlet leaves
Flutter as birds adown the wold,
I may have run the glorious race,
And caught the torch while yet aflame,
And called upon the Holy name
Of Him who now doth hide His face."

Apart from the light these poems throw upon his mental and spiritual attitude at that period, they are extremely interesting as revealing the literary influences governing him at the time. I have already referred to the resemblance between his sonnets and the more finished ones of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and this point cannot better be illustrated than by placing the work of the two men in juxtaposition.

If we take, for instance, Rossetti's "Lady of the Rocks."

"Mother, is this the darkness of the end,
 The Shadow of Death? and is that outer sea
 Infinite imminent Eternity?
 And does the death-pang by man's 'seed sustained
 In Time's each instant cause thy face to bend
 Its silent prayer upon the Son, while He
 Blesses the dead with His hand silently
 To His long day which hours no more offend?
 Mother of grace, the pass is difficult,
 Keen as these rocks, and the bewildered souls
 Throng it like echoes, blindly shuddering through.
 Thy name, O Lord, each spirit's voice extols,
 Whose peace abides in the dark avenue
 Amid the bitterness of things occult."

and compare it with "E Tenebris." We are at once struck with the same mode of expression, the same train of thought and the same deep note of pain in the two poems.

And again take Wilde's "Madonna Mia"—

"I stood by the unvintageable sea
 Till the wet waves drenched face and hair with spray,
 The long red fires of the dying day
 Burned in the west; the wind piped drearily;
 And to the land the clamorous gulls did flee:
 'Alas!' I cried, 'my life is full of pain,
 And who can garner fruit or golden grain,
 From these waste fields which travail ceaselessly!
 My nets gaped wide with many a break and flaw
 Nathless I threw them as my final cast
 Into the sea, and waited for the end.
 When lo! a sudden glory! and I saw
 From the black waters of my tortured past
 The argent splendour of white limbs ascend!"

and compare it with Rossetti's "Venetian Pastoral" and "Mary's Girlhood," and we can almost imagine that the painter was holding up pictures to inspire the young poet.

"Red underlip drawn in for fear of love
And white throat, whiter than the silvered dove,"

might almost have been written by Rossetti himself.

More characteristically original are the lines—

"I saw
From the black waters of my tortured past
The argent splendour of white limbs ascend,"

from the "Vita Nuova," though one cannot fail to perceive a faint Baudelairian note.

"Where behind lattice window scarlet wrought and gilt
Some brown-limbed girl did weave thee tapestry,"

at once reminds us of the Rossetti influence.

The poem itself shows considerable skill in construction and deftness in the moulding of the sentences, moreover, there is a freshness in the treatment of the theme that a less original writer would have found great difficulty in imparting. Here again we see the Catholic note as when he writes—

"Never mightest thou see
The face of Her, before whose mouldering shrine
To-day at Rome the silent nations kneel;
Who got from Love no joyous gladdening,
But only Love's intolerable pain,
Only a sword to pierce her heart in twain,
Only the bitterness of child-bearing."

There is one especially fine bit of imagery—

“The lotus-leaves which heal the wounds of death
Lie in thy hand—”

which bears the very truest imprint of poetry.

With the poet's return to England, a reaction took place, and the sight of English woodlands and English lanes caused a strong revulsion of feeling.

“This English Thames is holier far than Rome
Those harebells like a sudden flush of sea
Breaking across the woodland, with the foam
Of meadow-sweet and white anemone,
To fleck their blue waves,—God is likelier there
Than hidden in that crystal-hearted star the pale monks
bear.”

The green fields and the smell of the good brown earth come as a refreshing contrast to the incense laden atmosphere of foreign cathedrals. And yet his fancy delights in commingling the two. In the “violet-gleaming” butterflies he finds Roman Monsignore (he anglicises the word by the way and gives it a plural “s,”), a lazy pike is “some mitred old Bishop *in partibus*,” and “The wind, the restless prisoner of the trees, does well for Palestrina.”

He revels in the contrast that the refreshing simplicity of rural England presents to the pomp and splendour of Rome. The “lingering orange afterglow” is “more fair than all Rome's lordliest pageants.” The “blue-green beanfields” “tremulous with the last shower” bring sweeter

perfume at eventide than "the odorous flame-jewelled censers the young deacons swing." Bird life suggests the conceit that—

"Poor Fra Giovanni bawling at the Mass,
Were out of tune now for a small brown bird
Sings overhead."

His love of nature, his passion for flowers and the music of nature find continued and ecstatic expression.

"Sweet is the swallow twittering on the eaves."

Everything appeals to him, "the heavy lowing cattle stretching their huge and dripping mouths across the farmyard gate," the mower whetting his scythe, the milkmaid carolling blithely as she trips along.

"Sweet are the hips upon the Kentish leas,
And sweet the wind that lifts the new-mown hay,
And sweet the fretful swarms of grumbling bees
That round and round the linden blossoms play;
And sweet the heifer breathing on the stall
And the green bursting figs that hang upon the red-brick wall."

No matter that he mixes up the seasons somewhat and that having sung of bursting figs he refers, in the next line, to the cuckoo mocking the spring—"when the last violet loiters by the well"—the poem is still a pastoral breathing its fresh flower-filled atmosphere of the English countryside. Wilde is, however, saturated with classical lore and (though on some minds the

fantasy may jar) he introduces Daphnus and Linus, Syrinx and Cytheræa. But he is faithful to his English land, he talks of roses which "all day long in vales Æolian a lad might seek for" and which "overgrows our hedges like a wanton courtesan, unthrifty of its beauty," a real Shakespearean touch. "Many an unsung elegy," he tells us, "Sleeps in the reeds that fringe our winding Thames." He peoples the whole countryside with faun and nymph—

"Some Mænad girl with vine leaves on her breast
Will filch their beech-nuts from the sleeping Pans,
So softly that the little nested thrush
Will never wake, and then will shrilly laugh and leap will
rush
Down the green valley where the fallen dew
Lies thick beneath the elm and count her store,
Till the brown Satyrs in a jolly crew
Trample the loosetrife down along the shore,
And where their horned master sits in state
Bring strawberries and bloomy plums upon a wicker crate."

And yet the religious influence still makes itself felt.

"Why must I behold [he exclaims]
The wan white face of that deserted Christ
Whose bleeding hands my hands did once enfold?"

but it is only momentary, and once more he sports with the sylvan gods and goddesses till

"The heron passes homeward from the mere,
The blue mist creeps among the shivering trees,
Gold world by world the silent stars appear
And like a blossom blows—before the breeze
A white moon drifts across the shimmering sky."

and he hears "the curfew booming from the bell at Christ Church gate."

Wilde never wrote anything better in verse than this with the single exception of "The Ballad of Reading Gaol." The poem deserves to rank among the finest pastorals in the language. It is essentially musical, written with artistic restraint and with a discrimination of the use of words and their combination that marks the great artist. It is a true nature poem and it will appeal to all those who prefer musical verse to the artificial manufacture of rhymes, and simple sentences to the torturing of words into unheard-of combinations.

As a contrast to it comes the "Magdalen Walks" which, in construction and rhythm, is somewhat lacking in ease and freedom. It is a curious thing that Wilde's affections seemed to alternate between the unordered simplicity of English woods and meadows and the trim artificial parterres and bouquets of Versailles or Sans Souci. There is a constraint about the metre of this poem which does rather suggest a man walking along a trim avenue from which he can perceive flowers, meadows and riotous hedges—in the distance. There is also a suggestion of Tennyson's "Maud" about—

"And the plane to the pine tree is whispering some tale of
love

Till it rustles with laughter and tosses its mantle of green

And the gloom of the wych elm's hollow is lit with the iris
sheen
Of the burnished rainbow throat and the silver breast of
a dove."

"*Impression du Matin*" might be said to be a successful attempt to render a Whistler pastel into verse, but there is a human note about the last verse that elevates the poem far above such a mere *tour de force*, and there is a fine sense of effect in the picture of the "pale woman all alone" standing in the glimmering light of the gas lamp as the rays of the sun just touch her hair.

"*A Serenade*" and "*Endymion*" possess all the qualities that a musical setting demands, but do not call for especial comment. It is, however, in "*La Bella Donna della mia Mante*" that the expression of the poet's genius finds vent.

"As a pomegranate, cut in twain,
White-seeded, is her crimson mouth"

is as perfect a metaphor as one could well wish to find.

"*Charmides*" is a more ambitious effort than anything he had yet attempted. The word-painting is obviously inspired by Keats, for whose work he had an intense admiration. Such lines as "Came a great owl with yellow sulphurous eyes," and "Vermilion-finned with eyes of bossy gold" might have been taken

straight out of "Lamia," so truly has he caught the spirit of his master. But if enamoured of Keats's gorgeous colouring Wilde revelled in the construction of jewelled phrase and crimson line, there is another source of inspiration noticeable in the poem. Had Shakespeare never written "Venus and Adonis," Wilde might have written "Charmides" but it would not have been the same poem. The difference between the true poet who has studied the great verse of bygone ages and the mere imitator is that one will produce a work of art enhanced by the suggestions derived from the contemplation of the highest conception of genius, whereas the other will out-run the constable and merely accentuate and burlesque the distinguishing characteristics of the work of others. In the case in point, whilst we note with pleasure and interest the points of resemblance between the poem and the models that its author has followed, we are conscious that what we are reading is a work of art in itself and that its intrinsic merits are enhanced by the points of resemblance and do not depend on them for their existence.

There is another poem—"Ballade de Marguerite"—which recalls memories of Keats, closely resembling as it does "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." Rarely has the old ballad form been more successfully treated. We catch the very spirit of mediævalism in the lines—

“Perchance she is kneeling in St. Denys
(On her soul may our Lady have grammercy !)
Ah, if she is praying in lone chapelle
I might swing the censer and ring the bell.”

It is so easy to overdo the thing, to produce a bad counterfeit made up of Wardour Street English, that to retain the simplicity of language and the slight *souçon* of Chaucerian English requires all the skill of a master craftsman, and the intimate knowledge of the value and date of words that can only result from a close acquaintance with the works of the ballad writers.

In “The Dole of the King’s Daughter” Wilde again essays the ballad form, but this time the treatment shows more traces of the Rossetti influence. The ballad spirit is maintained with unerring skill and the form perfectly adhered to throughout. To quote good old Izaak Walton—
“old-fashioned poetry but choicely good.”

As conveying the idea of impending tragedy nothing could be more effective than the simplicity of the lines

“There are two that ride from the south and east
And two from the north and west,
For the black raven a goodly feast
For the king’s daughter rest.”

In this ballad as in the “Chanson” he uses the old device, so common in ancient ballads, of making the alternate lines parenthetical, as, for instance—

“There is one man who loves her true,
 (Red, O red, is the stain of gore!)
 He hath duggen a grave by the darksome yew,
 (One grave will do for four).”

A rather clever parody of this mode of construction is worth quoting here—

“SAGE GREEN”

(By a Fading-out Æsthete)

“My love is as fair as a lily flower.
(The Peacock blue has a sacred sheen!)
 Oh, bright are the blooms in her maiden bower.
(Sing Hey! Sing Ho! for the sweet Sage Green!)

Her face is as wan as the water white.
(The Peacock blue has a sacred sheen!)
 Alack! she heedeth it never at all.
(Sing Hey! Sing Ho! for the sweet Sage Green!)

The China plate it is pure on the wall.
(The Peacock blue has a sacred sheen!)
 With languorous loving and purple pain.
(Sing Hey! Sing Ho! for the sweet Sage Green!)

And woe is me that I never may win;
(The Peacock blue has a sacred sheen!)
 For the Bard's hard up, and she's got no tin.
(Sing Hey! Sing Ho! for the sweet Sage Green!)”

Among the sonnets written at this period the one on Keats's grave in which he does homage to him whom he revered as a master is especially felicitous in its ending—

“Thy name was writ in water—it shall stand
 And tears like mine will keep thy memory green
 As Isabella did her Basil-tree.”

Than the graceful introducing of Keats's poem no more delicate epitaph could be well imagined. Shelley's last resting-place likewise inspired his pen and there is an "Impression de Voyage" written at Katakolo at the period of his visit to Greece in company with Professor Mahaffy, the concluding line of which, "I stood upon the soil of Greece at last," conveys more by its reticence than could be expressed in volumes.

Of his five theatrical sonnets headed "Impressions de Theatre," one is addressed to the late Sir Henry Irving and the three others to Miss Ellen Terry. It is curious that of the three Shakespearean characters he mentioned as worthier of the actor's great talents than *Fabiendei Franchi*—viz. Lear, Romeo, and Richard III.,—the only one that Irving ever played was Romeo, and in that part he was a decided failure, which, considering his peculiar mannerisms and method, as well as his age at the time, was not to be wondered at. The fifth was probably intended for Madame Sarah Bernhardt, whose wonderful rendering of *Phèdre* could not fail to deeply impress so cultured a critic as the author of these poems.

In "Panthea" Oscar Wilde gives rein to his amorous fancy, and, inspired by the poets of Greece and Rome, peoples the world with gods and goddesses who mourn the old glad pagan days—

“Back to their lotus-haunts they turn again
 Kissing each other's mouths, and mix more deep
 The poppy-seeded draught which brings soft purple-
 lidded sleep.”

How rich is the language here employed, how exquisite the lilt of “soft purple-lidded sleep.” Not even Tennyson in “The Lotus Eaters” has done anything better than this. And how delicately expressed is the idea embodied in the lines—

“There in the green heart of some garden close
 Queen Venus with the shepherd at her side,
 Her warm soft body like the briar rose
 Which should be white yet blushes at its pride—”

or, how tender the fancy that inspired

“So when men bury us beneath the yew
 Thy crimson-stained mouth a rose will be,
 And thy soft eyes lush bluebells dimmed with dew.”

None but a poet could have written those lines; the stately wording of the second line is purposely chosen to enhance the perfect simplicity of the third.

The poems comprised within “The Fourth Movement” include the “Impression,” “Le Reveillon,” the first verse of which runs—

“The sky is laced with fitful red,
 The circling mists and shadows flee,
 The dawn is rising from the sea,
 Like a white lady from her bed—”

which inspired the parodist with—

"MORE IMPRESSIONS"

(By Oscuro Wildgoose)

DES SPONETTES

"My little fancy's clogged with gush,
 My little lyre is false in tone,
 And when I lyrically moan,
 I hear the impatient critic's 'Tush!'
 But I've 'Impressions.' These are grand!
 Mere dabs of words, mere blobs of tint,
 Displayed on canvas or in print,
 Men laud, and think they understand.
 A smudge of brown, a smear of yellow,
 No tale, no subject,—there you are!
 Impressions!—and the strangest far
 Is—that the bard's a clever fellow."

I quote the two parodies to show how little Oscar Wilde's verse was appreciated by his contemporaries. There is an unfairness and misrepresentation about them which is significant of how the poet's poses and extravagancies had prejudiced the public mind.

In the two love poems "*Apologia*" and "*Quia multi Amori*" a deeper key is struck, and a note of pain predominates. There is a restraint about the versification and the colour of the words that strikes the right chord and tunes the lyre to a subdued note.

The underlying passion and regret find their supreme expression in the lines—

"Ah! hadst thou liked me less and loved me more,
 Through all those summer days of joy and rain,
 I had not now been sorrow's heritor
 Or stood a lackey in the House of Pain."

The "hadst thou liked me less and loved me more" deserves to pass into the language with Richard Lovelace's

"I could not love thee, dear, so much,
Loved I not honour more."

In "Humanitad" we get a view of the country in winter time, and

"The gaunt bittern stalks among the reeds
And flaps his wings, and stretches back his neck,
And hoots to see the moon; across the meads
Limps the poor frightened hare, a little speck;
And a stray seamew with its fretful cry
Flits like a sudden drift of snow against the dull grey
sky."

The picture is complete, we see the bare countryside, the sky grey with impending snow, and the animal life introduced uttering nature's cry of desolation. But hope is not dead in the poet's breast; he sees where, when springtime comes, "nodding cowslips" will bloom again and the hedge on which the wild rose—"That sweet repentance of the thorny briar"—will blossom out. He runs through the whole flower calendar, using the old English names "boy's-love," "sops in wine," and "daffodillies."

"Soon will the glade be bright with bellamour
The flower which wantons love and those sweet nuns
Vale-lilies in their snowy vestiture,
Will tell their beaded pearls, and carnations
With mitred dusky leaves will scent the wind
And straggling traveller's joy each hedge with yellow
stars will bind."

Once more we note how the flowers are personalities for him, a view which could not long escape the humorists of *Punch*, and which was amply taken advantage of by the writer of some burlesque verses, two of which are sufficiently amusing to quote—

“My long lithe lily, my languid lily,
 My lank limp lily-love, how shall I win—
 Woo thee to wink at me? Silver lily,
 How shall I sing to thee, softly, or shrilly?
 What shall I weave for thee—which shall I spin—
 Rondel, or rondeau, or virelay?
 Shall I buzz like a bee, with my face thrust in
 Thy choice, chaste chalice, or choose me a tin
 Trumpet, or touchingly, tenderly play
 On the weird bird-whistle, *sweeter than sin*,
 That I bought for a halfpenny, yesterday?”

My languid lily, my lank limp lily,
 My long, lithe lily-love, men may grin—
 Say that I'm soft and supremely silly—
 What care I, while you whisper stilly;
 What care I, while you smile? Not a pin!
 While you smile, while you whisper—"Tis sweet
 to decay!
 I have watered with chlorodine, tears of chagrin,
 The churchyard mould I have planted thee in,
 Upside down, in an intense way,
 In a rough red flower-pot, *sweeter than sin*,
 That I bought for a halfpenny, yesterday!"

Nature appeals to Oscar Wilde in all her moods, and though he might at times assume the pose of preferring art to nature, he gives expression to his real feelings when he exclaims:

“Ah! somehow life is bigger after all
Than any painted Angel could we see
The God that is within us!”

The lines speak for themselves and are strongly indicative of his attitude towards nature and art at that period. The true spirit of Catholicism had gripped him; the influence of Rome was at work, though enfeebled, and remained latent within him till in his hour of passing he found peace in the bosom of the great Mother, who throughout the ages has always held out her arms to the sinner and the outcast.

There has always been a certain amount of mystery attached to another poem of Wilde's called “The Harlot's House,” written at the same period as “The Duchess of Padua” and “The Sphinx”—that is, when he was living in the Hotel Voltaire. It was originally published in a magazine not later than June 1885. It is a curious thing that all researches up to the present as to the name of the publication have proved fruitless, and that the approximate date of the appearance of the verses has been arrived at by reference to a parody entitled “The Public House,” which appeared in *The Sporting Times*, of all papers in the world, on 13th June 1885. First, an edition of the poem was brought out privately by the Methuen Press in 1904 with five illustrations by Althea Gyles, in which the bizarre note is markedly, though artistically,

dominant. Another edition was privately printed in London in 1905 in paper wrappers.

The idea of this short lyrical poem is that the poet stands outside a house and watches the shadows of the puppet dancers "race across the blind.

"The dancers swing in a waltz of Strauss"—the "Treues Liebes Herz"—"like strange mechanical grotesques" or "black leaves wheeling in the wind." The marionettes whirl in the ghostly dance, and——

"Sometimes a clockwork puppet pressed
A phantom lover to her breast,
Sometimes they seemed to try and sing."

The man turns to his companion and remarks that "the dead are dancing with the dead," but drawn by the music she enters the house. As Love enters the house of Lust the gay seductive music changes to a discord, and the horrible shadows disappear. Then the dawn breaks, creeping down the silent street "like a frightened girl."

That is all, but as a high specimen of imaginative it stands alone. That the author was inspired by memories of Baudelaire and Poe is beyond dispute. Nevertheless, the poem, in conception as well as execution, is essentially original. The puppet dancers' *motif* was afterwards introduced by him with telling effect as we shall see later in "The Ballad of Reading

Gaol." Hardly ever have the bizarre and the *macabre* been used with such artistic effect as in this short poem, nor have the imaginative gifts of its author ever found a finer scope. If he had written nothing else than these lines they would confer immortality on him. Like all truly great work they are imperishable and will form part of English literature when far more widely read effusions are set aside and forgotten.

I have remarked on the original character of the poem in spite of its obvious sources of inspiration, and there can be no better way of verifying this than by giving an example of Baudelaire's own incursion into puppet land—

"DANSE MACABRE"

*"Fière, autant qu'un vivant, de sa noble stature,
Avec son gros bouquet son mouchoir et ses gants,
Elle a la nonchalance et la désinvolture
D'un coquette maigre aux airs extravagants.*

*Vit-on jamais au bal une taille plus mince ?
Sa robe exagérée, en sa royale ampleur,
S'écroule abondamment sur un pied sec que pince
Un soulier pomponné, joli comme une fleur.*

*La ruche qui se joue au bord des clavicules,
Comme un ruisseau lascif qui se frotte au rocher,
Défend pudiquement des lazzi ridicules
Les funèbres appas qu'elle tient à cacher.*

*Ses yeux profonds sont faits de vide et de ténèbres,
Et son crâne, de fleurs artistement coiffé,
Oscille mollement sur ses frêles vertèbres,
—O charme d'un néant follement attisé !*

*Aucuns t'appelleront une caricature,
Qui ne comprennent pas, amants ivres de chair,
L'élégance sans nom de l'humaine armature,
Tu réponds, grand squelette, à mon gout le plus cher !*

*Viens-tu troubler, avec ta puissante grimace,
La fête de la Vie ? ou quelque vieux désir,
Eperonnant encor ta vivant carcasse,
Te pousse-t-il, crédule, au sabbat du Plaisir ?*

*Au chant des violons, aux flammes des bougies,
Espères-tu chasser ton cauchemar moqueur,
Et viens-tu demander au torrent des orgies
De rafraîchir l'enfer allumé dans ton cœur ?*

*Inépuisable quits de sottise et de fautes !
De l'antique douleur éternel alambic !
A travers le treillis recourbé de tes côtes
Je vois, errant encor, l'insatiable aspic.*

*Pour dire vrai, je crains que ta coquetterie
Ne trouve pas un prix digne de ses efforts ;
Qui, de ces sœurs mortels, entend la raillerie ?
Les charmes de l'horreur n'enivrent que les forts !*

*Le gouffre de tes yeux, plein d'horrible pensées,
Exhale le vertige, et les danseurs prudents
Ne contempleront pas sans d'amères nausées
Le sourire éternel de tes trente-deux dents.*

*Pourtant, qui n'a serré dans ses bras un squelette,
Et qui ne s'est nourri des choses du tombeau ?
Qu'importe le parfum, l'habit ou la toilette ?
Qui fait le dégoûté montre qu'il se croit beau.*

*Bayadère sans nez, irrésistible gouge,
Dis donc à ces danseurs qui font les offusqués :
' Fiers mignons, malgré l'art des poudres et du rouge,
Vous sentez tous la mort ! ' O squelettes musques.*

*Antinous flétris, dandys à face glabre,
Cadavres vernisses, lovelaces chenues,
Le branle universel de la danse macabre
Vous entraîne en des lieux qui ne sont pas connus !*

*Des quais froids de la Seine aux bords brûlants du Gange,
Le troupeau mortel saute et se pâme, sans voir,
Dans un trou du plafond la trompette de l'Ange
Sinistrement béante ainsi qu'un tromblon noir.*

*En tout climat, sous ton soleil, la Mort t'admire
En tes contorsions, risible Humanité,
Et souvent, comme toi, se parfumant de myrrhe,
Mêle son ironie à ton insanité !"*

The French poem lacks the simplicity and the directness of its English fellow. It appears overloaded and artificial in comparison, and above all it lacks the music which results from the juxtaposition of the Anglo-Saxon a, e, i, and u sounds, and the Latin ahs and ohs.

But, on the other hand, as an example of the precious and artificial in literature, a further poem of Wilde's written at this period, "The Sphinx," reveals another phase of his extraordinarily versatile genius.

The metre of the poem is the same as that of "In Memoriam," though, owing to the stanzas being arranged in two long lines instead of the fairly short ones in Tennyson's poem, this might at first escape attention. The poet at the time of writing we learn had

"hardly seen

Some twenty summers cast their green for Autumn's gaudy liveries."

(which would seem to indicate that this part, at any rate, was written at an earlier period than the rest of the poem), and in the very first lines he tells us that—

“In a dim corner of my rooms far longer than my fancy
thinks
A beautiful and silent sphinx has watched me through the
silent gloom.”

Day and night—

“this curious cat
Lies crouching on the Chinese mat with eyes of satin rimmed
with gold.”

Here we have in a very few words an exact picture of this “exquisite grotesque half-woman and half-animal,” whom, after the manner of Edgar Allan Poe with his raven, he proceeds to apostrophise—

“Oh tell me” [he begins] “were you standing by when Isis
to Osiris knelt?
And did you watch the Egyptian melt her union for
Antony?”

and plies her with many questions of similar nature. Presently he adjures her—

“Lift up your large black satin eyes which are like cushions
where one sinks!
Fawn at my feet, Sphinx! and sing me all your memories.”

This idea of comparing the velvet depths of the eyes to “cushions where one sinks” is quaint and original, though distinctly decadent, nor is the note of the *macabre* wanting, as—

“When through the purple corridors the screaming scarlet
Ibis flew
In terror, and a horrid dew dripped from the moaning
mandragores.”

There is a wonderful use of contrast in the introduction of sweating mandragores in connection with the purple of the corridors and the scarlet plumage of the Ibis. How daring, likewise, the grotesque note introduced as he recites the catalogue of her possible lovers and asks—

“Did giant Lizards come and couch before you on the reedy banks?

Did Gryphons with great metal flanks leap on you in your trampled couch?

Did monstrous hippopotami come sidling towards you in the mist?

Did gilt-scaled dragons writhe and twist with passion as you passed them by?”

The speaker will find out the secret of her amours. There is nothing too bizarre, too monstrous to include in the list.

“Had you shameful secret quests” [he asks] “and did you hurry to your home

Some nereid coiled in amber foam with curious rock crystal breasted?”

Not Baudelaire himself could have invented anything more precious than the description of this sea-nymph, but the gruesome must be introduced. “Did you,” he inquires,

“Steal to the border of the bar and swim across the silent lake?

And slink into the vault and make the Pyramid your lupanar,

Till from each black sarcophagus rose up the painted swathed dead?”

Wilde catalogues through the whole Egyptian mythology; he is inclined to give first place to "Ammon."

"You kissed his mouth with mouths of flame: you made the hornèd god your own:

You stood behind him on his throne: you called him by his secret name.

You whispered monstrous oracles into the caverns of his ears:

With blood of goats and blood of steers you taught him monstrous miracles."

Decadent the idea may be, but how cleverly, how subtly the effects are produced and how well sustained is the atmosphere of chimerical, nightmare horrors. Wilde makes use of the impression derived from the contemplation of colossal figures—the Egyptian galleries of the Louvre were, one may be certain, a daily haunt of his at the time—and he describes—"Nine cubits span" and his limbs are "Widespread as a tent at noon," but he was of flesh and blood for all that.

"His thick soft throat was white as milk and threaded with thin veils of blue,"

and he was royally clad, for—

"Curious pearls like frozen dew were embroidered on his flaming silk."

His love of rare and beautiful things finds an outlet in the description of the jewels and retinue of the god.

"Before his gilded galliot ran naked vine-wreathed corybantes,
And lines of swaying elephants knelt down to draw his chariot."

Barbaric splendour and Eastern gorgeousness
we have here and in one line the sense of immense wealth is conveyed—

"The meanest cup that touched his lips was fashioned from a chrysolite."

But now—

"The god is scattered here and there: deep hidden in the windy sand
I saw his giant granite hand still clenched in impotent despair."

And he bids her—

"Go seek the fragments on the moor and wash them in the evening dew,
And from their pieces make anew thy mutilated paramour."

With mocking irony he tells her to "wake mad passions in the senseless stone."

He counsels her to return to Egypt, her lovers are not dead—

"They will rise up and hear your voice
And clash their cymbals and rejoice and run to kiss your mouth! . . ."

He advises to—

"Follow some raving lion's spoor across the copper-coloured plain,"

and take him as a lover or to mate with a tiger—

“And toy with him in amorous jests, and when he turns
and snarls and gnaws
O smite him with your jasper claws! and bruise him with
your agate breasts!”

But “her sullen ways” pall on him, her presence fills him with horror, “poisonous and heavy breath makes the light flicker in the lamp.”

The poet wonders what “songless tongueless ghost of sin crept through the curtains of the night.” He drives the cat away with every opprobrious epithet for she wakes in him “each bestial sense” and makes him what he “would not be.” She makes his “creed a barren shame,” and wakes “foul dreams of sensual life,” and with a return to sanity he chases her away. “Go thou before,” he cries,

“And leave me to my crucifix
Whose pallid burden sick with pain watches the world
with wearied eyes
And weeps for every soul that dies, and weeps for every
soul in pain.”

On this note of pessimism and refusal the poem ends. In the realm of the fantastic it has no equal and though the objection may be raised that the whole thing is unhealthy, the truth is that it is merely an experimental excursion in the abnormal. It has all the fantastic unreality of Chinese dragons, and, therefore, can in no way be harmful. The nightmare effect has no lasting influence. We read it as we would any other

imaginative grotesque. But whilst we are alternately fascinated and repulsed by the subject, we are lost in admiration of the decorative treatment of the theme. The whole performance is artificial, but so is all Oriental art.

It is true that Baudelaire's poems, with their morbid, highly polished neurotic qualities, had fascinated the young artist and exercised a powerful influence over him, but "The Sphinx" was an achievement apart and totally different from any other of his poems. It is more in the nature of an extravaganza, an opium dream described in finely chiselled, richly tinted phrases. | Every young poet goes through various phases and this was only a phase in the author's literary career. Nothing could be better than the workmanship, and that the poem should so rivet the attention and attract where it most repels is the greatest tribute to the genius of its creator. It is essentially a weird conception expressed in haunting cadences, an esoteric gem for all those who have brains to think and the necessary artistic sense to appreciate really good work. That persons of inferior mental calibre and narrow views should be shocked by it is only to be expected, and the author himself excused the delay in publishing it by explaining that "it would destroy domesticity in England!" The original edition, it may be mentioned, was published in September 1894 by Messrs Elkin

Mathews and John Lane, and was limited to two hundred copies issued at 42s. with twenty-five on larger paper at 105s. It was magnificently illustrated by Mr C. R. Ricketts, the delicacy and distinction of whose work is too well known to need comment.

In striking contrast to the artificiality and decadent character of "The Sphinx" stands the author's imperishable "Ballad of Reading Gaol." What the circumstances were that led to the writing of this great masterpiece have been already sufficiently dealt with in the earlier portion of this work. It has been aptly said that all great art has an underlying note of pain and sorrow, beautiful work may be produced without it, but not the work that is worthy to rank among the great creative masterpieces of the world. "*Quand un homme et une poésie,*" writes Barbey d'Aubrevilly, "*ont dévalé si bas dans la conscience de l'incurable malheur qui est fond de toutes les voluptés de l'existence poésie et homme ne peuvent plus que remonter.*" There can be no doubt that this poem could never have been written but for the terrible ordeal the poet had been through. It is incomparably Wilde's finest poetic work—great, not only by reason of its beauty, but great on account of the feeling for suffering humanity, his power to enter into the sorrows of others and to forget his own trials in the sympathetic con-

temptation of the agony of his fellow-sufferers which it reveals. The words of another distinguished French critic might almost have been written about him :

“ Désormais divorcée d’avec l’enseignement historique, philosophique et scientifique, la poésie se trouve ramenée à sa fonction naturelle et directe, qui est de réaliser pour nous la vie, complémentaire du rêve, du souvenir, de l’espérance, du désir ; de donner un corps à ce qu’il y a d’insaisissable dans nos pensées et de secret dans le mouvement de nos âmes ; de nous consoler ou de nous châtier par l’expression de l’idéal ou par le spectacle de nos vices. Elle devient non pas *individuelle*, suivant la prédiction un peu hasardeuse de l’auteur de *Jocelyn*, mais *personnelle*, si nous sous-entendons que l’âme du poète est nécessairement une âme collective, une corde sensible et toujours tendue que font vibrer les passions et les douleurs de ses semblables.”

With Coleridge’s “Ancient Mariner,” “Reading Gaol,” holds first place amongst the ballads of the world, and by many critics it is held, by reason of its deep feeling and anguished intensity, to be a finer piece of work than the older poet’s *chef d’œuvre*.

Although the author’s identity was concealed under the cypher “C33,” there was never a moment’s doubt as to who the writer was. It came as a shock to the British public that the

man who, but a couple of years before, had stood in the public pillory, the man whose work the great majority, who had never even read it, believed to be artificial, meretricious, and superficial, should be the author of a deeply moving poem that could be read by the most prudish and strait-laced.

The Times, that great organ of English respectability, devoted a leading article to it of a highly eulogistic character. The edition was sold out at once, and the book was on all men's tongues. Wherever one went one heard it discussed, priest and philistine were as loud in their praises of it as the most decadent of minor poets. No poem had for a generation met with such a friendly reception or caused such a sensation.

A critical notice of the poem from the pen of Lady Currie appeared in *The Fortnightly Review* for July 1904. In it the author writes of the "terrible 'Ballad of Reading Gaol' with its splendours and inequalities, its mixture of poetic farce, crude realism, and undeniable pathos." As to the crudeness of the realism, that is a mere matter of opinion: it is easy to supply an adjective—it is more difficult to justify the use of it, and give satisfactory reasons for its application. Realistic the poem doubtless is—crude, never. but the writer shows a far keener appreciation when she says—"all is grim, concentrated tragedy from cover to cover. A friend of mine," Lady

Currie says, "who looked upon himself as a judge in such matters, told me that he would have placed certain passages in this poem, by reason of their terrible, tragic intensity, upon a level with some of the descriptions in Dante's 'Inferno,' were it not that 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol' was so much more infinitely human."

Among the many laudatory notices that appeared at the time, there is an extract from a review of the work taken from a great London paper and quoted by a French writer which is worth reprinting as showing the attitude of the press towards the poem.

"The whole is awful as the pages of Sophocles. That he has rendered with his fine art so much of the essence of his life and the life of others in that inferno to the sensitive is a memorable thing for the social scientist, but a much more memorable thing for literature. This is a simple, a poignant, a great ballad, one of the greatest in the English language."

Never, perhaps, since Gray's "Elegy" had a poem been so revised, pruned and polished over and over again as this cry from a prison cell. The publisher was driven to the verge of distraction by the constant alterations and emendations, the placing of a comma had become a matter of moment to the fastidious author, but the work was published in its entirety save for two or

three stanzas concerning one of the prison officials that it was deemed wise to suppress.

The poem bears the dedication—

IN MEMORIAM

C. T. W.

Sometime Trooper of the Royal Horse Guards

Obiit, H.M. Prison, Reading, Berkshire

July 7th, 1896.

The case of the trooper to whose memory the work is dedicated excited a good deal of interest at the time. He had a fit of jealousy, murdered his sweetheart, and though public opinion was inclined to take a merciful view of the crime, and a petition was presented to the Home Secretary for the withdrawal of the capital sentence, it was without effect, and the extreme penalty of the law was carried out in the Gaol at Reading.

The first line—

“He did not wear his scarlet coat”—

rivets the attention at once, and as surely as do the opening lines of “The Ancient Mariner.” The reason for this is given at once—

“For wine and blood are red
And blood and wine were on his hands
When they found him with the dead.”

That the whole incident that led to the man's being there should be communicated in the very first stanza, to make that stanza complete,

is an artistic necessity, and in the next two lines we are told who the victim is—

“The poor dead woman whom he loved,
And murdered in her bed.”

The tragedy is complete. We have the picture of the soldier deprived of his uniform and the whole story is revealed to us. A more concise or supremely reticent description of the pathetic drama there could not be. But the picture must be filled in even to the most trivial detail, and we see the poor wretch taking his daily exercise among the prisoners awaiting their trial, attired in “a suit of shabby grey,” trying to demean himself like a man and, trivial, but, from the artist’s point of view, important detail, with a cricket cap on his head. There is a world of pathos and lines of unspoken tragedy in that cricket cap worn by a man whose days are numbered, who never will play a game again and whose mind must be occupied with thoughts far removed from sport and amusement save perhaps when they may revert to happy days spent with bat and ball, and which will never recur again. But though his step be jaunty, the oppression of his impending doom is on him,

“I never saw a man who looked
So wistfully at the day.”

We can see that prison yard, the circle of convicts pacing the melancholy round at ordered

intervals and with measured tread, and the strong man, full of life and vigour looking up at God's blue sky and drinking in the air with greedy lungs. We can see the author of the poem, the erstwhile social favourite, in his convict garb walking

“With other souls in pain
Within another ring.”

and his horror as he receives the information muttered by some fellow-prisoner through closed lips that

“That fellow's got to swing.”

In words, the simplicity and intensity of which are sublime, he tells us of how the news affected him—

“Dear Christ! the very prison walls
Suddenly seemed to reel.”

That apostrophe to the Redeemer is a revelation in itself coming from a man who is enduring his own mortal agony, but his particular sorrows fade into insignificance and are forgotten in the presence of a fellow-creature's crucifixion—

“And, though I was a soul in pain,
My pain I could not feel.”

Already he is purified by his months of trial and tribulation, and he can enter sympathetically into the sorrows of others and share their burden.

He now understands the reason of the jaunty step and the defiant manner, he himself has tried to flee from his thoughts.

"I only knew what hunted thought
Quickened his step."

He realises the meaning of that "wistful
look" towards the vaulted canopy of heaven.

The man had killed the thing he loved.

"Yet each man kills the thing he loves
By each let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word;
The coward does it with a kiss
The brave man with a sword."

It has been objected that making sword rhyme with word is a makeshift, but surely it is patent to anyone with any artistic sense whatever that this forced rhyme avoids the danger of making the verse too facile, and, far from being a piece of slovenly writing, is the well-thought-out scheme of a perfect master of his craft. It is one of those stupid objections that superficial critics are so apt to raise when utterly devoid themselves of any sense of proportion or fitness.

The idea that all men, young or old, kill the thing they love is not only original but it is a very fine flight of metaphor—there is a whole sermon in the conception, and Wilde elaborates the theme—

"The kindest use a knife because
The dead so soon grow old."

It is as we read these lines that our thoughts are immediately directed to "The Dream of Eugene

Aram," that incomparable masterpiece of another poet, who likewise was looked upon as a mere jester whose work should not be treated seriously, but who has left us three of the finest and most deeply moving poems in the English language. There is a striking resemblance in the wording between the two poems, but without disparaging Hood's work there can be no possible doubt as to which is the greater and more noble achievement.

Another stanza elaborates the theme still further and the fact is recorded that though every man kills the thing he loves, yet death is not always meted out to him.

"He does not die a death of shame
On a day of dark disgrace,
Nor have a noose about his neck,
Nor a cloth upon his face
Nor drop feet foremost through the floor
Into an empty space."

Within these grim prison walls all the horrible details of execution obtrude themselves upon the wretched captive. He has tasted the horrors of solitary confinement, of being spied on night and day by grim, taciturn warders who, at frequent intervals, slide back the panel in the door to observe through the grated opening that the prisoner is all right. So he can feel all the torture that a man under sentence of death must go through at having to

“Sit with silent men
Who watch him night and day,
Who watch him when he tries to weep
And when he tries to pray.”

The ceaseless watch that is kept on the poor wretch lest he should be tempted, given the opportunity, to “rob the prison of its prey” by doing violence on himself, the whole grim ceremonial of the carrying out of the law’s decree are conjured up by him. He pictures the doomed man awakened from sleep by the entrance of the Sheriff, and the Governor of the Gaol accompanied by the “shivering Chaplain robed in white.” He dwells on the hurried toilet, the putting on of the convict dress for the last time whilst the doctor takes professional stock of every nervous symptom. It is to be hoped that the lines descriptive of the doctor are purely imaginative—one must hope, for the credit of the medical profession, that it has no foundation in personal experience. Then there is the awful thirst that tortures the victim and another introduction of an apparently trivial detail, “the gardener’s gloves” worn by the hangman. But the detail is not trivial, its introduction adds to the ghastliness of the scene. The reading of the Burial Service over a man yet living is another realistic touch that serves its purpose. With him we can enter into the agony of the condemned wretch as he prays

“with lips of clay
For his agony to pass.”

Wilde proceeds with the strict narrative. He tells us how for six weeks that Guardsman walked the prison yard still wearing the same suit and his head covered with the same incongruous headgear.

Still does he cast yearning glances at the sky,

“And at every wandering cloud that trailed
Its ravelled fleeces by.”

But the man is no coward, he does not wring his hands and bemoan his fate, he merely kept his eyes on the sun “and drank the morning air.”

The other convicts, forgetful of themselves and their crimes, watch with silent amazement “The man who had to swing.” He still carries himself bravely and they can hardly realise that he will so soon be swept into eternity ; and then a perfectly mediæval note is struck—

“For oak and elm have pleasant leaves
That in the springtime shoot :
But grim to see is the gallows-tree
With its adder-bitten root
And green or dry a man must die
Before it bears its fruit.”

There we have the true spirit of the old ballads. The comparison between the oak and elm in the spring putting forth their leaves, and the gaunt, bare timber of the gibbet with its burden of dead human fruit is a highly imaginative and artistic

piece of fantasy, though possibly a poem of Villon's was in Wilde's mind at the time of writing.

He gives us in the next stanza a picture of the murderer with noose adjusted to his neck, taking his last look upon the world, and the drop suggests another finely imaged comparison to him—

“ 'Tis sweet to dance to violins
When Love and Life are fair,”

and goes on so for another two lines before he brings in the antithesis—

“ But it is not sweet with nimble feet
To dance upon the air.”

The almost morbid fascination the sight of this man with his foot in the grave exercises over him is undiminished, till one day he misses him and knows that he is standing “In black dock's dreadful pen.” He himself had been through that dread ordeal and his spirit goes out to him whom he had seen daily for a brief space without ever holding commune with him.

“ Like two doomed ships that pass in storm
We had crossed each other's way,”

he writes, and proceeds to explain that it was impossible for them to exchange word or sign, as they never saw each other in the “holy” night but in the “shameful” day. In a passage of rare beauty, one of the finest in the poem, he explains—

"A prison wall was round us both
Two outcast men we were
The world had thrust us from his heart,
And God from out His care :
And the iron gin that waits for Sin
Had caught us in its snare."

The lines in their supreme reticence indicate precisely the agony and despair that filled the heart of C33, and once again a comparison with "Eugene Aram" is forced upon us.

The third period starts with a picture of the doomed man and a scathing bit of satire directed against the prison officials. The wretch is shown to us watched day and night by keen, sleepless eyes, debarred even for a brief second of the privilege of being alone with his thoughts and his misery.

Then a small detail is introduced to heighten the effect of the grim picture—

"And thrice a day he smoked his pipe
And drank his quart of beer."

There is quite a Shakespearean note in this introduction of these commonplace details, which proves how thoroughly Oscar Wilde had studied the methods of the great dramatist.

But he leaves the condemned cell to paint the effect the whole ghastly tragedy being enacted within those grey walls had upon the other prisoners. To a highly strung and supersensitive nature like the writer's the strain must have

been terrible. The captives went through the allotted tasks of picking oakum till the fingers bled, scrubbing the floors, polishing the rails, sewing sacks, and all the other daily routine of prison life.

“But in the heart of every man
Terror was lying still—”

until one day, returning from their labours, they “passed an open grave,” and they knew that the execution would take place on the morrow. They saw the hangman with his black bag shuffling through the gloom, and like cowed hounds they crept silently back to their cells. Then night comes and Fear stalks through the prison, but the man himself is wrapt in peaceful slumbers. The watching warders cannot make out

“How one could sleep so sweet a sleep
With a hangman close at hand.”

Not so with the other prisoners—“the fool, the fraud, the knave”—sleep is banished from their cells, they are feeling another’s guilt, and the hardened hearts melt at the thought of another’s agony. The warders, making their noiseless round, are surprised as they look through the wickets to see “gray figures on the floor.” They are puzzled and wonder—

“Why men knelt to pray
Who never prayed before.”

All through the long night they keep their sacred vigil.

“The grey cock crew, the red cock crew
But never came the day,”

and their imaginations people the corners and shadows with shapes of terror. The marionette dance of death of these ghostly visitants is as fine a bit of word-painting as can be found anywhere. The idea is an amplification of the *motif* of “The Harlot’s House,” but how immeasurably superior, how much more artistically effective the most cursory comparison of the two poems will make apparent.

At last the first faint streaks of day steal through the prison bars and the daily task of cleaning the cells is performed as usual, but the Angel of Death passes through the prison, and with parched throats the prisoners, who were kept in their cells while the grim tragedy was being enacted, wait for the stroke of eight, the hour fixed for the carrying out of the sentence. As the first chimes of the prison clock are heard a moan arises from those imprisoned wretches. At noon they are marched out into the yard, and each man’s eye is turned wistfully to the sky, just as the condemned man’s had been. They notice that the warders are wearing their best uniforms, but the task they have just been engaged upon is revealed “by the quicklime on their boots.” The murderer has expiated his crime,

“And the crimson stain that was of Cain
Became Christ’s snow-white seal.”

In his dishonoured grave he lies in a winding-sheet of quicklime ; no rose or flower shall bloom above it, no tear shall water it, no prayer or benison be uttered over it.

“In Reading Gaol by Reading Town,” with a repetition of the stanza embodying the theme that “all men kill the thing they love,” the poem ends.

Truly a wonderful poem this. We close the covers of the book slowly, almost reverently, our minds all saddened and attuned to a low note by this gloomy picture of agony, torture and horror. We feel as if we had been assisting at a funeral, and with hushed voices slowly make our way back to the world of life and bustle.

Wilde’s place in poetry has yet to be settled, we have not yet had time to focus his work into perspective. That he will rank amongst the very greatest creative geniuses of the world, the men whose songs sway nations, is doubtful, though time alone can tell us.

The least that can be said is that there is a distinction about Wilde’s poetry that will always stamp it as the work of a great artist, and as such it commands a high place amongst the best literary work that this country has produced.

PART VI

THE FICTION WRITER



FICTION

THAT the gift of composing beautiful verse and the ability to write gracefully and wittily in prose does not of necessity enable an author to produce good fiction, is a truism that requires no elaboration. That the novelist should possess style is a *sine quâ non*—that is, if his novels are to take their place as works of art and not merely achieve an ephemeral success amongst the patrons of circulating libraries—but to achieve distinction in the field of romance many other qualities are requisite. To begin with, the story must be of sufficient interest to hold the attention of the reader, the dialogue must be brisk and to the point, and the delineation of character—a gift in itself—lifelike and convincing.

Whether Oscar Wilde would, had his life been prolonged, have ever achieved success in this branch of literature is one of those vexed questions which may well be left to those speculative persons who love to discuss “The Mystery of Edwin Drood” and other unfinished works of fiction. That he was endowed with an extraordinarily vivid imagination and that his versatility was marvellous are factors that no one should neglect to take into account when considering the matter. His own contributions to

fiction are so few that they afford very little data to go upon. They consist of "The Picture of Dorian Gray," published in 1890; "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime"; "The Incomparable and Ingenious History of Mr W. H., being the true secret of Shakespeare's Sonnets, now for the first time here fully set forth," the manuscript of which, after passing through the hands of Messrs Elkin Mathews and John Lane, publishers, who had announced the work as being in preparation, has been unaccountably lost, although it is known that it was returned to the author's house on the very day of his arrest. An article in *Blackwood's Magazine* alone enables us to gather some idea of the last work. Then we have three short stories—"The Sphinx without a Secret," "The Canterville Ghost," "The Model Millionaire," which complete the list of Wilde's fiction in the limited sense of the word.

A careful study of these remains must lead to the inevitable conclusion that, so far as we can judge by these more or less fragmentary specimens, Wilde's *forte* was not fiction. He can in no sense be regarded as a novelist, certainly not as an exponent of modern fiction. The pieces are brilliantly clever, gemmed with paradoxes and quaint turns of thought, but they are not fiction in the accepted sense of the word. Works of imagination, yes, but "fiction," no. That he was a graceful allegorist nobody can deny, but

that his work in this other field of letters was great is never for a moment to be even suggested. He used fiction as a means of introducing his curiously topsy-turvy views of life, but his characters are mere puppets, strange creatures with unreal names, without any particular personality or especially characteristic features, who enunciate the author's views and opinions.

In a preface to "Dorian Gray," when it was published in book form, Oscar Wilde himself confirms this view—"The highest and the lowest form of criticism," he tells us, "is a mode of autobiography." That he himself believed in the artistic value of his story is evident from the series of brilliant aphorisms which constitute the preface.

When in July, 1890, there appeared in an American magazine the fantastic story of "Dorian Gray" an astonished public rubbed its eyes and wondered whether all its previous theories as to this class of work had been absolutely false and should henceforth be discarded like a garment that has gone out of fashion.

The story provoked a storm of criticism which, for the most part, only served to increase the sale of the magazine in which it appeared. In answer to his critics the author contented himself with the dictum that "Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, com-

plex, and vital." Whether "The Picture of Dorian Gray" possessed these three essential qualities is a question which may best be answered by giving a short *resume* of the story itself. Basil Hallward, a young artist who, some years previously, had caused a great sensation by his disappearance, has painted a full-length portrait of a young man of "extraordinary personal beauty." In conversation with Lord Henry Wotton, who is visiting the studio, he inadvertently reveals that it is the portrait of Dorian Gray, and alleges as his reason for not exhibiting the picture that he has put too much of himself into it; and, pressed for an explanation, he tells the story of his meeting the original of the painting at a Society function, and how deeply he had been impressed by his extraordinary personality. He experiences a "curious artistic idolatry" for the young man, and as they are discussing him the servant announces "Mr Dorian Gray." We then get a word-picture of this interesting young man, we are told that there was something in his face which made you trust him, that it was full of the candour of youth and passionate purity. During the sitting that follows, Lord Henry enunciates his views of life, and his words leave a deep impression on his youthful auditor. Dorian's acquaintance with Lord Henry soon ripens into friendship, and he confides to his friend that he has fallen deeply in love with

Sybil Vane, a young actress he has accidentally discovered in an East End playhouse.

Late upon the same night on which the confidence was made Lord Henry finds, on his return home, a telegram from Dorian Gray announcing his engagement to the object of his affections. We are next introduced to Sybil's shabby home in the Euston Road ; to her mother, a faded, tired-looking woman with bismuth-whitened hands, and to her brother, a young lad with a thick-set figure, rough brown hair and large hands and feet "somewhat clumsy in movement." The faded beauty of the elder woman and her theatrical gestures and manners are deftly touched upon. The son, whom we learn is about to seek his fortune in Australia, goes with his sister for a walk in the park, and their talk is all of her love for Dorian, of which he does not approve. Sybil catches sight of her lover, but before she can point him out to her brother he is lost to sight. They return home ; the lad's heart is filled with jealousy, and a fierce murderous hatred of the stranger who, as it seemed to him, had come between him and his sister. Downstairs he startles his mother with a sudden question—"Were you married to my father?" The woman had been dreading the question for years, but she answers it in the negative, and tells him that his parent was a gentleman and highly connected, but not free to

marry her. In the meanwhile, Lord Henry and Basil are discussing the proposed marriage in the private room of a fashionable restaurant, and presently they are joined by Dorian himself, who takes part in the discussion, till it is time for them to go to the theatre. His two friends are delighted with the beauty of his *fiancée*, but her acting is below mediocrity, and the boy, who has seen her act really well on previous occasions, is terrible disconcerted.

Later, in the green-room, Sybil explains the reason of this falling off. She is quite candid about it: she tells him she will never act well again, because he has transfigured her life, and that acting, which had before been a matter of reality to her, had become a hollow sham, and that she can no longer mimic a passion that burns her like fire. Flinging himself down on a seat, Dorian exclaims, "You have killed my love," and after an impassioned tirade answers his own question of "What are you now?" with "A third-rate actress with a pretty face." In vain she pleads for his love; he leaves her telling her that he can never see her again, for she has disappointed him. When, after wandering aimlessly about all night, he returns home, he is suddenly conscious of a change in the portrait Basil had painted of him. The expression is different, and there are lines of cruelty round the mouth, though he can trace no such lines in his own face.

“Suddenly, there flashed across his mind what he had said in Basil Hallward’s studio the day the picture had been finished. . . . He had uttered a mad wish that he himself might remain young and the portrait grow old, that his own beauty might be untarnished and the face on the canvas bear the burden of his passions and his sins.” He is struck with remorse for his cruelty to Sybil, and by the time Lord Henry comes to see him has determined to atone for it by marrying her, but it is too late. He learns from his friend’s lips that Sybil has committed suicide in the theatre shortly after he had left her.

He spends the evening at the opera with Lord Henry Wotton, and his sister, Lady Gwendolen. When, next day, he mentions this to Basil the latter is horrified, but Dorian is perfectly callous and is inclined to be flattered by the fact that the girl should have committed suicide for love of him.

Basil wishes to look at the picture, which he intends to exhibit in Paris, and before which Dorian has placed a screen, but the latter will not let him see it, and the former presently goes away greatly puzzled by the refusal. When he is gone Dorian sends for a framemaker, and gets him and his assistant to remove the draped picture to a disused room in his house, having previously sent his man out with a note to Lord Henry in order to get him out of the way. Hav-

ing dismissed the framemaker and his assistant, he carefully locks the door of the room and retains the key. When he comes down, he finds that Lord Henry has sent him a paper containing an account of the inquest on Sybil, and an unhealthy French book which fascinates whilst it repels him, and the influence of which he cannot shake off for years after.

Time passes, but the hero of the story shows no signs of growing older, nor does he lose his good looks. Meanwhile, the most evil rumours as to his mode of life are in circulation. We learn that he is in the habit of frequenting, disguised and under an assumed name, a little ill-famed tavern near the docks, and we are given a long analysis of his mental and spiritual condition, whilst his various idiosyncrasies are carefully recorded, and we are insensibly reminded of the surroundings invented for himself by the hero of Huysman's "A Rebours."

All the while, the picture remains hidden away, a very skeleton in the cupboard. Dorian Gray is nearly blackballed for a West End Club, Society looks askance at him, and there are all sorts of ugly rumours current as to his doings and movements.

One night he meets Hallward, who wants to talk to him about his mode of life. The painter enumerates all the scandalous stories he has heard about him; he ends up by expressing a

doubt whether he really knows his friend. To do so, he says, he should have to see his soul. "You shall see it yourself to-night," Dorian exclaims, "it is your handiwork," and, holding a lamp, he takes him up to the locked room, and removes the drapery from the picture. An exclamation of horror breaks from the painter as he perceives the hideous face on the canvas grinning at him. It fills him with loathing and disgust, and he has difficulty in believing it to be his own work. Dorian is seized with an uncontrollable feeling of hatred for his friend, and, seizing a knife lying on a chest, stabs him in the neck and kills him. After the murder he locks the door, and goes quietly downstairs. He slips out into the street closing the front door very gently, and rings the bell. When his valet opens it he explains that he had left his latchkey indoors, and casually inquires the time, which the man informs him is ten minutes past two.

The next day Dorian sends for a former friend of his, Alan Campbell, whose hobby is chemistry, and after telling him of the murder, begs him by some chemical process to destroy the body. Alan refuses to help him. Dorian then writes something upon a piece of paper and gives it to the other to read. Alan is terror-struck and consents to do what is required of him, though reluctantly. When later, provided with the necessary chemicals, they enter the locked room,

Dorian perceives that the hands of the picture are stained with blood.

He dines out that night, and when he returns home he provides himself with some opium paste he keeps locked up in a secret drawer, and having dressed himself in rough garments makes his way to the docks. He enters an opium den, but the presence of a man who owes his downfall to him irritates him, and he decides to go to another. A woman greets him with the title "Prince Charming" (the name Sybil had given him), and on hearing it a sailor gets up from his seat and follows him. In a dim archway he feels himself seized by the throat and sees a revolver pointed at his head. Briefly, his assailant tells him that he is Sybil's brother, and that he means to avenge his sister's death. A sudden inspiration comes to Dorian and he inquires of the man how long it is since his sister died. "Eighteen years," is the answer, and Gray triumphantly exclaims "Look at my face." He is dragged under a lamp, and at sight of the youthful face Sybil's brother is convinced that he has made a mistake. Hardly has Dorian gone, when the woman who had called him Prince Charming comes up, and from her the sailor learns that in eighteen years Dorian has not altered.

Dorian goes down to his country house, where he entertains a large party of guests, though all

the while he lives in deadly terror lest Sybil's brother should trace him. During a *battue* a man is accidentally shot by one of Dorian's guests. It is at first thought that the victim of the accident is one of the beaters but it turns out to be a stranger, a seafaring man presumably. Dorian goes to look at the body, and to his intense relief finds that the dead man is his assailant of some nights back.

Back in London one night Dorian Gray determines that he will reform, and, curious to see whether his good resolutions have had any effect on the portrait, he goes up to look at it. No, it still bears the same repulsive look, and in a rage he stabs at it with the knife with which he had murdered Basil. A loud agonised cry rings through the house, and when the servants at last make their way into the room they find hanging upon the wall a splendid portrait of their master as they had last seen him, while lying on the floor with a knife through his heart was a dead man "withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage," whom they could only identify by the rings on his fingers.

Such, shorn of all its brilliant dialogue and exquisite descriptive passages, is the story of "The Portrait of Dorian Gray," in its bald outlines. As an imaginative work it must rank high, and in spite of the fantastic character of the plot and its inherent improbability, it

exercises a weird fascination over us as we read. That its author (more even in the treatment than in the plot) was inspired by Balzac's incomparable "*Peau de Chagrin*" is beyond question. In the one story we have a man purchasing a piece a shagreen skin inscribed with Sanskrit characters which, as each of its possessor's desires are gratified, by its shrinkage marks a diminution in the span of his life. In the other, whilst the original man remains outwardly unchanged, his portrait ages with the years and reveals in its features all the passions and sins that gradually transform his nature. In both cases the story ends in tragedy.

The colouring of the tale is one of its most remarkable features. In passages of rare beauty Oscar Wilde gives us descriptions of jewels and perfumes, rare tapestries and quaint musical instruments. The catalogue of the jewels as set out by him deserves to be quoted for the marvellous knowledge of precious stones it reveals as well as for the exquisite description of them.

"He would often spend a whole day settling and resettling in the cases the various stones that he had collected, such as the olive-green chrysoberyl that turns red by lamplight, the cymophane with its wirelike line of silver, the pistachio-coloured peridot, rose-pink and wine-yellow topazes, carbuncles of fiery scarlet with

tremulous four-rayed stars, flame-red cinnamon stones, orange and violet spinels, and amethysts with the alternate layers of ruby and sapphire. He loved the red-gold of the sunstone, and the moonstone's pearly whiteness, and the broken rainbow of the milky opal. He procured from Amsterdam three emeralds of extraordinary size and richness of colour, and had a turquoise *de la vicille roche* that was the envy of all connoisseurs."

It may here be pointed out, though the fact is not generally known, that Wilde's knowledge of tapestry which, at first sight, seems so profound, was obtained from Lefebure's "History of Embroidery and Lace," a book which he had reviewed in an article having for title "A Fascinating Book." It is interesting to compare an extract from that article with a passage from the review under discussion :

"Where was the great crocus-coloured robe, on which the gods fought against the giants, that had been worked for Athena? Where the huge velarium that Nero had stretched across the Colosseum at Rome, on which were represented the starry sky, and Apollo driving a chariot drawn by white gilt-reined steeds? He longed to see the curious table-napkins wrought for Elagabalus, on

"Where is the great crocus-coloured robe that was wrought for Athena, and on which the gods fought against the giants? Where is the huge velarium that Nero stretched across the Colosseum at Rome, on which was represented the starry sky, and Apollo driving a chariot drawn by steeds? How one would like to see the curious table-napkins wrought for Heliogabalus, on which were

which were displayed all the dainties and viands that could be wanted for a feast; the mortuary cloth of King Chilperic, with its three hundred golden bees; the fantastic robes that excited the indignation of the Bishop of Pontus, and were figured with 'lions, panthers, bears, dogs, forests, rocks, hunters,—all, in fact, that a painter can copy from nature'; and the coat that Charles of Orleans once wore, on the sleeves of which were embroidered the verses of a song beginning '*Madame je suis tout joyeux*,' the musical accompaniment of the words being wrought in gold thread, and each note, of square shape in those days, formed with four pearls. He read of the room that was prepared at the palace at Rheims for the use of Queen Joan of Burgundy, and was decorated with 'thirteen hundred and twenty-one parrots, made in broidery, and blazoned with the king's arms and five hundred and sixty-one butterflies, whose wings were similarly ornamented with the arms of the queen, the whole worked in gold.' Catherine de Medicis had a mourning-bed made for her of black velvet powdered with crescents and suns. Its

displayed all the dainties and viands that could be wanted for a feast; or the mortuary cloth of King Chilperic, with its three hundred golden bees; or the fantastic robes that excited the indignation of the Bishop of Pontus, and were embroidered with 'lions, panthers, bears, dogs, forests, rocks, hunters—all, in fact, that painters can copy from nature.' Charles of Orleans had a coat, on the sleeves of which were embroidered the verses of a song, beginning '*Madame, je suis tout joyeux*,' the musical accompaniment of the words being wrought in gold thread, and each note (of square shape in those days) formed with four pearls. The room prepared in the palace at Rheims for the use of Queen Joan of Burgundy was decorated with 'thirteen hundred and twenty-one *papegauts* (parrots) made in broidery and blazoned with the King's arms, and five hundred and sixty-one butterflies, whose wings were similarly ornamented with the Queen's arms—the whole worked in fine gold.' Catherine de Medicis had a mourning-bed made for her 'of black velvet embroidered with pearls and powdered with crescents and suns.' Its cur-

curtains were of damask, with leafy wreaths and garlands, figured upon a gold and silver ground, and fringed along the edges with broideries of pearls, and it stood in a room hung with rows of the queen's devices in cut black velvet upon cloth of silver. Louis XIV. had gold-embroidered caryatides fifteen feet high in his apartment. The state bed of Sobieski, King of Poland, was made of Smyrna gold brocade embroidered in turquoises with verses from the Koran. Its supports were of silver gilt, beautifully chased, and profusely set with enamelled and jewelled medallions. It had been taken from the Turkish camp before Vienna, and the standard of Mohammed had stood under it."

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Wilde, who at times was extremely indolent, had an amiable weakness for using the material at hand, and throughout his writings we find whole lines of verse and prose sentences reappearing in work produced at another period. It is the same with the epigrams in "Dorian Gray," most of which were subsequently transferred, bodily, to his plays. During his travels in Italy, as I have already pointed out, he had been enormously impressed by the stately ceremonials of the Catholic Church, and in this book he uses

his opportunity of introducing the ornate and sumptuous vestments worn at her services. Dorian Gray, he tells us, "had a special passion also for ecclesiastical vestments, as indeed he had for everything connected with the service of the Church. In the long cedar chests that lined the west gallery of his house he had stored away many rare and beautiful specimens of what is really the raiment of the Bride of Christ, who must wear purples and jewels and fine linen that she may hide the pallid macerated body that is worn by the suffering that she seeks for, and wounded by self-inflicted pain. He had a gorgeous cope of crimson silk and gold-thread damask, figured with a repeating pattern of golden pomegranates set in six-petalled formal blossoms, beyond which on either side was the pineapple device wrought in seed-pearls. The orphreys were divided into panels representing scenes from the life of the Virgin, and the coronation of the Virgin was figured in coloured silks upon the hood. This was Italian work of the fifteenth century. Another cope was of green velvet, embroidered with heart-shaped groups of acanthus-leaves, from which spread long-stemmed white blossoms, the details of which were picked out with silver thread and coloured crystals. The morse bore a seraph's head in gold-thread raised work. The orphreys were woven in a diaper of red and gold silk, and

were starred with medallions of many saints and martyrs, among whom was St Sebastian. He had chasubles, also, of amber - coloured silk, and blue silk and gold brocades, and yellow silk damask and cloth of gold, figured with representation of the Passion and Crucifixion of Christ, and embroidered with lions and peacocks and other emblems; dalmatics of white satin and pink silk damask, decorated with tulips and dolphins and *fleurs de lys*; altar frontals of crimson velvet and blue linen; and many corporals, chalice - veils, and sudaria."

It may also be noted here that a couple of chapters, those dealing with Sybil's home and the death of her brother, were not written till the story appeared in book form, and a certain extra number of words were required to make the volume of the requisite bulk; so must writers submit to the inexorable demands of publishers who measure work not by its merit but by a footrule.

The dialogue throughout the tale sparkles with brilliant epigrams, and this is all the more notable when we remember that the story was written in a hurry, when the author was hard pressed for money, is more or less a piece of hack work, and that whole pages were written in at the behest of the publisher, who, like a customer at the baker's demanding the make-

weight which the law allows him, was clamouring for more "copy."

Nothing could be more felicitous than "young people imagine that money is everything . . . and when they grow older they know it"; and, "to be good is to be in harmony with oneself." And characteristic of that Epicurean pose that the author delighted in is the paradoxical dictum that "a cigarette is the perfect type of a perfect pleasure. It is exquisite, and it leaves one unsatisfied." Likewise essentially characteristic of the man and his extraordinary, topsy-turvy views of life is, "There is a fatality about good resolutions—that they are always made too late," or "Good resolutions are useless attempts to interfere with scientific laws. They are simply cheques that men draw on a bank where they have no account."

Some of the epigrams are as biting as a *Saturday Review* article, in the old days, as for instance, this description of a certain frail dame—"She is still *decolletée*, and when she is in a very smart gown she looks like an *édition de luxe* of a bad French novel." Could anything be more pithy or more brilliantly sarcastic? It is of this same lady that the remark is made, "When her third husband died, her hair turned quite golden from grief."

But one could go on for ever, and I have quoted enough to illustrate the wittiness of the

dialogue, and, as the author himself lays down, "Enough is as good as a meal." And there, by the way, we have an illustration of how cleverly Wilde could transform the commonest saws by the alteration or the transposition of a word, even sometimes by the inversion of a sentence into what, at the first flush, appeared to be highly original and brilliant sayings. By the substitution of the word "meal" for "feast" we fail to recognise the old homely saying, and are ready, until we consider it more closely, to receive it as a new and witty idea neatly embodied. It is a *truc de métier*, but one that requires a clever workman to use properly, as anyone can make sure of by glancing through the bungling work of the majority of his imitators.

In "Dorian Gray," Wilde gives free play to his ever-present longing to utter the *dernier cri*, to avoid all that was *vieux jeu*, and to fill with horror and amazement the souls of the stodgy *bourgeoisie*. That he succeeded in doing so merely proves that the *bourgeoisie* are stodgy, not that the author has erred from the canons of art and good taste.

His short stories are all written in a lighter vein—we peruse them as we eat a plover's egg, and with the same relish and appreciation. They are things of gossamer, but gossamer will oft survive more solid material, and has the supreme quality of delicacy.

"Lord Arthur Savile's Crime" deals with that nobleman's anxiety to commit the murder a cheiromantist has predicted he will perpetrate, and to get the matter over before he marries the girl to whom he is engaged. His two successive failures and his final drowning of the hand-reading fortune-teller is conceived in the best spirit of comedy, and provokes a gentle continuous ripple of amusement as we read it. The same may be said of "The Sphinx without a Secret," and "The Canterville Ghost," whereas the "Model Millionaire" is simply a pretty story wittily told. The whole plot is summed up in its concluding lines "Millionaire models are rare enough . . . but model millionaires are rarer still."

But, incomparably, Wilde's best work in fiction is the "Portrait of Mr W. H." as the *Blackwood* article is headed. After reading it our regret becomes all the more poignant that the complete MS. of the book should have so unaccountably disappeared. Correctly speaking, the story is hardly a work of fiction, or, at anyrate, the fiction is so slight as to be hardly deserving of criticism, and is a mere medium for the exposition of a theory. The teller of the story is in a friend's rooms, and the talk drifts on to literary forgeries. The friend (Erskine) shows him a portrait-panel of a young man in late sixteenth-century costume, and proceeds to tell him his story. A young friend of his had discovered

what he considered a clue to the identity of the Mr W. H. of Shakespeare's Sonnets, the only hitch being the difficulty of proving that the young actor to whom he asserted his poems were written, ever existed. He shortly afterwards produced a panel-portrait of the young man which he had, as he alleged, discovered clamped to the inside of an old chest picked up by him at a Warwickshire farmhouse. This final proof quite convinced Erskine of the genuineness of the discovery, and it was not till an accidental visit to a friend's studio that the fact of the panel being a forgery was revealed to him. He taxes the discoverer of the clue with it and the latter commits suicide. The writer of the story is so impressed with the various proofs that Erskine has laid before him that, in spite of that latter's utter scepticism as to the existence of any such person as the dead man evolved from the Sonnets themselves, he completes the researches on his own account. But the moment he has sent off a detailed account of the result of his investigations to Erskine, he himself is filled with an utter disbelief in the accuracy of the conclusions derived from them. Erskine, on the other hand, is once more converted by his letter to his dead friend's theory.

Two years later the writer receives a letter from Erskine written from Cannes stating that, like the discoverer of the clue, he has committed

suicide for the sake of a theory which he leaves to his friend as a sacred legacy stained with the blood of two lives. The writer rushes off to the Riviera only to find his friend dead, and to receive from his mother the ill-starred panel.

The story ends with a true Wilde touch, for in a conversation with the doctor who had attended him, he learns that Erskine had died of consumption and had never committed suicide at all.

So much for the setting, which is quite unimportant. The real matter of moment is, that the *Blackwood* article is a really very valuable contribution to the controversy as to the identity of the mysterious Mr W. H.

It will be remembered that the Sonnets were first issued in book form in 1609, by a sort of piratical bookseller of those days, called Thames Thorpe who, on his own responsibility, prefixed the edition with a dedication—"To the only-begotten of these insuing sonnets, Mr W. H., all happinesse and that eternite promised by our ever living poet wisheth the well wishing adventurer in setting forth. T. T." Round the identity of this W. H. there has long raged an ardent controversy. Most of the commentators have rushed to the conclusion that he must be the person to whom the Sonnets are addressed. Some have attempted to identify him as Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton (the initials

being reversed), who is known to have been an early patron of the poet, others without much apparent reason have assumed that the W. H. in question was none other than William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke. The most probable theory is undoubtedly that of Mr Henry Lee, that the dedication is entirely Thorpe's own, that it has nothing whatever to do with Shakespeare or the inspirer of the poet, and that it was meant for William Hall, a sort of literary intermediary. In confirmation of this he adduces the undoubted fact that Thorpe had, at anyrate, once previously dedicated a work to its "begotten."

One point is established almost beyond dispute—viz. that the first 126 sonnets are addressed to a young man and the remainder refer to a "dark woman" who, after having bewitched the author, casts her spell over his young friend and estranges the two.

A counter-theory is that Shakespeare's selection of the sonnet, "that puling, petrifying, stupidly platonic composition," as Byron calls it, as a medium for his muse, is that he was experimenting in the style of writing which had become the fashion in England between the years 1591 and 1597.

Wilde's history is a totally new one, and deserves close examination. Given that it could be proved that the young actor to whom he maintains the Sonnets were addressed ever had

a real existence, and the matter would be as good as proved, but that is the weak point in his armour. Mayhap some enthusiast may, by digging amongst old deeds and papers, light upon some reference to him, but until then his hypothesis can be only regarded as an ingenious, though highly interesting speculation. Parenthetically it may be mentioned, although the fact is only known to very few, that an artist friend of Oscar Wilde, whose work is the admiration of all connoisseurs, had, under his direction, painted exactly such a panel-portrait as described, employing all the arts of the forger of antiquities in its production, and that a young poet whose recently published volume of verse had caused considerable sensation in literary circles had sat for the likeness.

The points Wilde advances in confirmation of his theory are as follows :—

1. That the young man to whom Shakepeare addresses sonnets must have been someone who was really a vital factor in the development of his dramatic art, and that this could not be said of either Lord Pembroke or Lord Southampton.

2. That the Sonnets, as we learn from Meres, were written before 1598 and that his friendship with W. H. had already lasted three years when Sonnet CIV. was written, which would fix the date of its commencement as 1594, or at latest 1595, that Lord Pembroke was born in 1580 and

did not come to London till he was eighteen (*i.e.* 1598) so that Shakespeare could not have met him till after the sonnet had been written; and that Pembroke's father did not die till 1601, whereas W. H.'s father was dead in 1598, as is proved by the line—

“ You had a father, let your son say so.”

3. That Lord Southampton had early in life become the lover of Elizabeth Vernon, so required no urging to enter the state of matrimony, that he was not dowered with good looks, and that he did not remember his mother as W. H. did. ('Thou art thy mother's glass, and she in thee calls back the lovely April of her prime), and moreover that his Christian name being Henry he could not be the Will to whom the punning sonnets (CXXXV. and CXLIII.) are addressed.

4. That W. H. is none other than the boy actor for whom Shakespeare created the parts of Viola, Imogen, Juliet, Rosalind, Portia, Desdemona and Cleopatra.

5. That the boy's name was Hughes.

These points he proves from the Sonnets themselves. As regards No. 1 he writes: “to look upon him as simply the object of certain love poems is to miss the whole meaning of the poems; for the art of which Shakespeare talks in the Sonnets is not the art of the Sonnets themselves, which indeed were to him but slight

and secret things, it is the art of the dramatist to which he is always alluding. He proceeds to quote the lines :

“Thou art all my art and dost advance
As high as learning my rude ignorance.”

2 and 3 effectually dispose of the pretensions of Pembroke and Surrey.

4. The theory of the very actor he praises by the fine sonnet :—

“‘How can my Muse want subject to invent,
While thou dost breathe, thou pour’st into my verse
Thine own sweet argument, too excellent
For every vulgar paper to rehearse ?
O, give thyself the thanks, if aught in me
Worthy perusal stand against thy sight :
For who’s so dumb that cannot write to thee,
When thou thyself dost give invention light ?
Be thou the tenth Muse, ten times more in worth
Than those old nine, which rhymers invoke ;
And he that calls on thee, let him bring forth
Eternal numbers to outlive long date.’”

The name of the boy he discovers in the eighth line of the 20th sonnet, where W. H. is punningly described as—

“A man in hew, all *Hews* in his contrawling,”

and draws attention to the fact that “In the original edition of the sonnets ‘Hews’ is printed with a capital H and in italics, and draws “corroboration from “these sonnets in which curious puns are made on the words ‘use’ and ‘usury.’”

Another point he touches on is that Will

Hughes abandoned Shakespeare's company to enter the service of Chapman, or more probably of Marlowe. He proves this from the lines—

“But when your countenance filled up his line
Then lack I matter; that enfeebled mine”—

as also

“Whilst I alone did call upon thy aid
My verse alone had all thy gentle grace,
But now my gracious numbers are decayed,
And my sick nurse does give another place”;

and further by

“Every alien pen has got my *use*
And under thee their poesy disperse,”

and draws attention to the “obvious” play upon words (*use* = Hughes).

Such in brief are the salient points of his argument, the limitations of space precluding me from amplifying the subject, but I strongly advise all those interested in the subject to read the whole article for themselves.

It is undoubtedly one of the cleverest things Wilde ever did, and as a contribution to controversial English literature no student of letters can afford to overlook it. Some day perhaps the manuscript of the book will be discovered—in the library of a Transatlantic millionaire maybe—and the author's more matured and expansive investigations be given to the world. May that day come soon!

PART VII

THE PHILOSOPHY OF BEAUTY

THE PHILOSOPHY OF BEAUTY

THE greatest claim that Wilde made for himself was that he was a high priest of æsthetics, that he had a new message concerning the relations of beauty and the worship of beauty to life and art, to life and to morals to give to the world. This claim was one in which to the last he pathetically believed. He was absolutely certain in his own mind that this was his vocation. He elaborated a sort of philosophy of beauty which not only pleased and satisfied himself, but found very many adherents, and became the dogma of a school.

Even in This last work, "De Profundis," written in the middle of his degradation and misery, he still believes that it is by art that he will be able to regenerate his spirit. He said that he would do such work in the future, would build beautiful things out of his sufferings, that he might cry in triumph—"Yes! This is just where the artistic life leads a man."

We all know where the artistic life did lead Oscar Wilde upon his release from prison. It led him to an obscure quarter of Paris where he dragged out the short remainder of an unhappy life, having written nothing save "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," and becoming more and more lost to finer aspirations.

Yet, nevertheless, this æsthetic philosophy of Wilde's forms one of the most important parts of his writings, and of his attitude towards life. It must, therefore, be carefully considered in any study of the man and his work.

First of all, let us inquire, what are æsthetics? Do not let anyone who has not given his attention to the subject imagine that the "æstheticism," which became known as the hallmark of a band of people led by Oscar Wilde who committed many whimsical extravagances, and who were caricatured in Mr Gilbert's "Patience," has any relation whatever to the science of æsthetics. Even to Oscar Wilde æstheticism, as it has been popularly called, was only the beginning of an æsthetic philosophy which he summed up finally much later in "Intentions," the "Poems in Prose," and "The Soul of Man under Socialism."

By æsthetics is meant a theory of the beautiful as exhibited in works of art. That is to say, æsthetics considered on its objective side has to investigate, first, a function of art in general as expressing the beautiful, and then the nature of the beauty thus expressed.

Secondly, the special functions of the several arts are investigated by æsthetics and the special aspects of the beautiful with which they are severally concerned. It, therefore, follows that æsthetics has to discuss such topics as the relation of art to nature and life, the distinction of

art from nature, the relation of natural to artistic beauty, the conditions and nature of beauty in a work of art, and especially the distinction of beauty from truth, from utility, and from moral goodness.

Æsthetics is, therefore, not art criticism. Art criticism deals with this or that particular work or type of art, while the æsthetic theory seeks to formulate the mere abstract and fundamental conceptions, distinctions, and principles which underlie artistic criticism, and alone make it possible. Art criticism is the link between æsthetic science and the ordinary intelligent appreciation of a work of art by an ordinary intelligence. Much more may be said in defining the functions of æsthetics, but this is sufficient before we begin to examine Wilde's own æsthetic theories.

His ideas were promulgated in the three works mentioned above, and also given to the world in lectures which he delivered at various times.

It is true, as Mr Arthur Symons very clearly pointed out some years ago, that Oscar Wilde wrote much that was true, new, and valuable about art and the artist. But in everything that he wrote he wrote from the outside. He said nothing which had not been said before him, or which was not the mere wilful contrary of what had been said before him. Indeed, it is not too

much to say that Oscar Wilde never saw the full face of beauty. He saw it always in profile, always in a limited way. The pretence of strict logic in Wilde's writing on "Artistic Philosophy" is only a pretence, and severe and steady thinkers recognise the fallacy.

Let us examine Oscar Wilde's æsthetic teaching.

In one of his lectures given in America he said—

"And now I would point out to you the operation of the artistic spirit in the choice of subject. Like the philosopher of the platonic vision, the poet is the spectator of all time and all existence. For him no form is obsolete, no subject out of date; rather, whatever of life and passion the world has known in the desert of Judea or in Arcadian valley, by the ruins of Troy or Damascus, in the crowded and hideous streets of the modern city, or by the pleasant ways of Camelot, all lies before him like an open scroll, all is still instinct with beautiful life. He will take of it what is salutary for his own spirit, choosing some facts and rejecting others, with the calm artistic control of one who is in possession of the secret of beauty. It is to no avail that the muse of poetry be called even by such a clarion note as Whitman's to migrate from Greece and Ionia and to placard 'removed' and 'to let' on the rocks of the snowy Parnassus.

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For art, to quote a noble passage of Mr Swinburne's, is very life itself and knows nothing of death. And so it comes that he who seems to stand most remote from his age is he who mirrors it best, because he has stripped life of that mist of familiarity, which, as Shelley used to say, makes life obscure to us.

“Whatever spiritual message an artist brings to his age, it is for us to do naught but accept his teaching. You have most of you seen probably that great masterpiece of Rubens which hangs in the gallery of Brussels, that swift and wonderful pageant of horse and rider, arrested in its most exquisite and fiery moment, when the winds are caught in crimson banner and the air is lit by the gleam of armour and the flash of plume. Well, that is joy in art, though that golden hillside be trodden by the wounded feet of Christ; and it is for the death of the Son of Man that that gorgeous cavalcade is passing.

“In the primary aspect a painting has no more spiritual message than an exquisite fragment of Venetian glass. The channels by which all noble and imaginative work in painting should touch the soul are not those of the truths of lives. This should be done by a certain inventive and creative handling entirely independent of anything definitely poetical in the subject, something entirely satisfying in itself, which is, as the Greeks would say, in itself an

end. So the joy of poetry comes never from the subject, but from an inventive handling of rhythmical language."

And further he said that "in nations as in individuals, if the passion for creation be not accompanied by the critical, the æsthetic faculty also, it will be sure to waste its strength. It is not an increased moral sense or moral supervision that your literature needs. Indeed one should never talk of a moral or immoral poem. Poems are either well written or badly written; that is all. Any element of morals or implied reference to a standard of good and evil in art is often a sign of a certain incompleteness of vision. All good work aims at a purely artistic effect."

In "Intentions" he enunciated serious problems which seemed constantly to contradict themselves, and he causes ourselves to ask questions which only bewilder and astonish. To sum up all the æsthetic teaching of the author it amounts simply and solely to the aphorism that there must be a permanent divorce between art and morals. "All art," he says, "is immoral."

Some people have taken the view that Oscar Wilde in his philosophy of beauty was never quite sincere. He did not write for philistines with his heart in his mouth, but merely with his tongue in his cheek. I remember Mr Richard Le Gallienne once said that in "Intentions" Wilde's worship of beauty, which had made a

latter-day myth of him before his time, was overlaid by his gift of comic perception, and, rightly viewed, all his flute-tone periods were written in the service of the comic muse. When he was not of malice aforethought humorous in those parts of the work where he seems to be arguing with a serious face enough, it is implied that he did so simply that he might smile behind his mask at the astonishment of a public he had from the first so delighted in shocking—that he had a passion for being called “dangerous,” just as one type of man likes to be called “fast” and a “rake.”

This is, of course, one point of view, but it is not one with which I am in agreement. Wilde — laid such enormous stress upon the sensuous side of art, and never realised that this is but an exterior aspect which is impossible and could not exist without a spiritual interior, an informing soul.

With all his brilliancy the author of “Intentions” only saw a mere fragment of his subject. It may be that he wilfully shut his eyes to the truth. It is more likely that he was incapable of realising the truth as a whole, and that what he wrote he wrote with absolute sincerity.

It has been said that the artist sees farther than morality. This is a dangerous doctrine for the artist himself to believe, but it has some truth in it. In Oscar Wilde’s case, in pursuing

the ideal of beauty he may have seen "farther than morality," but blind of one eye he missed Morality upon the way and did not realise that she was ever there.

It is the fashion nowadays among a certain set of writers, who form the remainder of the band of "Æsthetes" who followed Wilde in his teachings, to decry Ruskin, though, in the beginning of Wilde's "Æsthetic" movement, Wilde was an ardent pupil of this great master of English prose. We do not now accept Ruskin's artistic criticisms as adequate to our modern needs. Much water has flowed under the bridge since the days when Ruskin wrote, and his peculiar temperament, while appreciating much that was beautiful and worthy to be appreciated, was at the same time blind to much that is beautiful and worthy to be appreciated. Ruskin's criticism on the painting of Whistler would not be substantiated by a single writer of to-day. At the same time, all Ruskin's philosophy of art—that is to say, æsthetics—is as true now as it ever was. Ruskin showed, as the experience of life and art has shown and always will show—show more poignantly and particularly in the case of Oscar Wilde than in any other—that art and morality cannot be divorced, and that if all art is immoral, then art ceases to exist. "I press to the conclusion," he said, at the end of his famous lecture on the relation of art to morals,

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“which I wish to leave with you, that all you can rightly do, or honourably become, depends on the government of these two instincts of order and kindness, by this great imaginative faculty, which give you inheritance of the past, grasp of the present, authority over the future. Map out the spaces of your possible lives by its help; measure the range of their possible agency! On the walls and towers of this your fair city, there is not an ornament of which the first origin may not be traced back to the thoughts of men who died two thousand years ago. Whom will *you* be governing by your thoughts, two thousand years hence? Think of it, and you will find that so far from art being immoral, little else except art is moral; that life without industry is guilt, and industry without art is brutality: and for the words ‘good’ and ‘wicked,’ used of men, you may almost substitute the words ‘makers’ and ‘destroyers.’ Far the greater part of the seeming prosperity of the world is, so far as our present knowledge extends, vain: wholly useless for any kind of good, but having assigned to it a certain inevitable sequence of destruction and of sorrow. Its stress is only the stress of wandering storm; its beauty the hectic of plague: and what is called the history of mankind is too often the record of the whirlwind, and the map of the spreading of the leprosy. But underneath all that, or in narrow spaces of dominion in the

midst of it, the work of every man, *qui non accepit in vanitatem animam suam*, endures and prospers; a small remnant or green bud of it prevailing at last over evil. And though faint with sickness, and encumbered in ruin, the true workers redeem inch by inch the wilderness into garden ground; by the help of their joined hands the order of all things is surely sustained and vitally expanded, and although with strange vacillation, in the eyes of the watcher, the morning cometh, and also the night, there is no hour of human existence that does not draw on towards the perfect day."

For our own part let us examine a little into the relation between art and morality for ourselves.

When we hear it asserted that morality has nothing to do with art and that moral considerations are quite beside the mark in æsthetic criticism and judgment, such a statement is simply equivalent to saying that actual life has nothing to do with art. The main demand that we can make from art of all kinds is the demand of truth. Truth is beauty, and beauty is truth. By truth in this connection we mean that higher and more ideal truth which is inherent in the realities of things and contained by them, but which is brought out, explained, made credible, and visible by the artist in this or that sphere of art, and through the process of his art purified

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from the accidental obscurities which cloud it and hide it in the realm of actual life. If we are to demand truth from the artist, and let us always remember, as Keats realised so strongly, that in demanding truth we demand beauty also, we must insist that the artist must give us nothing in which a false psychology obtains, must, for example, paint no passions that do not occur in actual life. It is, therefore, equally necessary, on a logical conclusion, that when the subject of a work of art requires it, the moral should be represented as it really is—that is, according to its truth—and that the moral law should not be misrepresented. If we require of the artist that he should give a vivid representation of the illusions of human life, of the struggles and rivalries of men for objects and ends of imaginary value, we must equally demand of the artist that he should know and be capable of describing that which alone has true and absolute value in human life. Surely it is a truism that every drama from beginning to end contains a moral. It is a lie that art is immoral or can by its very nature ever be so. To say so, to pretend that art has a separate existence, is to say something which even the most brilliant paradox cannot prove and which immediately suggests to the mind of the thinking man an apologia or reason for licence of personal conduct. As a great German writer on æsthetics and the relation to the ethics

has said, all human actions do of necessity presuppose a norm, a rule to which they conform, or from which they depart; and there is nothing which can be represented, whether as criminal or as ridiculous, or as an object of irony, otherwise than under this assumption. Hence every artist enforces some kind of morality, and morality accordingly becomes of chief moment for æsthetic judgment.

Aristotle himself, from whom Oscar Wilde frequently quotes, and incidentally from whose poetics he attempts, by means of brilliant paradox, to infer an attitude which is not really there, has pointed out that art is a means of purification. If the morality of a work of art is false and wrong, if the artist is either ignorant of the subject with which he deals or deliberately misrepresents the morality of it, then his work is viewed merely as a work of art—and therefore as a thing whole and complete in itself—is a failure in art. In many respects it may have æsthetic excellence, but as a complete thing, as a work of art, it must inevitably fail.

Sibbern in his “*Æsthetik*” tells us very sanely and wisely that art need not be limited by choice of subject, but depends for its artistic qualities upon the attitude of the artist in dealing with it.

That art must not be limited by choice of subject is a great point of Oscar Wilde’s own philosophy, and here he is perfectly sound. But

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he goes further in his paradoxical view, and shows that the artist must hold no brief for either good or evil, and that the excellence of a work of art depends entirely upon the skill of presentation.

The German student, on the contrary, writes :

“There are dramas in which the moral element is not brought into special prominence, but just hovers above the surface, and which yet have their poetic value. What must, however, be absolutely insisted on is, that the artistic treatment should never insult morality. We do not mean that art must not represent the immoral as well as the moral, for this is, on the contrary, indispensable, if art is truly to reflect life as it is. But immorality must not infect and be inherent in that view of life and those opinions which the poet desires by his work to promulgate ; for then he would injure morality, and violate that moral ideal to which all human life, and therefore art itself, must be subordinated. Plays and novels which depict virtue as that mere conventionality and Philistinism which is but an object of ridicule, or which hold up to our admiration false and antinomian ideals of virtue, representing *e.g.*, the sentimentality of a so-called good heart as sufficient to justify the most scandalous moral delinquencies or ‘free genius’ as privileged to sin, which paint vice in attractive and seductive colours, portraying adultery and other transgres-

sions as very pardonable, and, under certain circumstances, amiable weaknesses, and which by means of such delineations bestow absolution on the public for sins daily occurring in actual life—such plays and novels are unworthy of art, and are as poison to the whole community.

“Equally with all untruth must all impurity be excluded from art. Purity and chastity are requirements resulting from the very nature of art. But it is just because art is so closely connected with sensuousness, that there is such obvious temptation to present the sensuous in false independence, to call forth the mere gratification of the senses. The sensuous must, however, be always subordinated to the intellectual, for this is involved in the demand for *ideality*, in other words, for that impress of perfection given by the idea and the mind in every artistic representation. And even if æsthetic ideality is present in a work of art, it must be subordinated to ethic ideality, to the moral purity in the artist’s mind, a purity diffused throughout the whole.”

Enough has been said and quoted to prove to all those who believe that art, while it is the chief regenerative force in life, cannot possibly be dissociated from morals, that Wilde’s view of art in its relation to morals is entirely unsound and dangerous to the half-educated and those who do not know how the greatest brains of the world

have regarded this question. It is not necessary to continue or to pile proof upon proof, easy though this would be.

From the people who have a little culture, imagine they have much more, and are dazzled by the splendour and beauty of Wilde's execution, it will be idle to expect an assent. Those who believe in art for art's sake as an infallible doctrine, may be divided into three classes.

First of all there are the very young, whose experience of life has not taught them the truth. They have not seen or known life as a whole, and, therefore, no sound ethical view can possibly disabuse them of the heresy.

There are those again, older and more mature, who have not made experience of life in its harsher and sadder aspects sufficient to wean them from Wilde's theory, in which they are interested from a purely academic point of view. And there is another class who are convinced secretly in their own hearts that art for art's sake is an untenable doctrine, but know that if they accepted it they would have to give up much which they are unable to do without and which makes life pleasant and dulls the conscience.

It is more satisfactory to turn to the consideration of "Intentions," and pay an enthusiastic and reverential meed of praise to this perfection of art. Marred here and there perhaps by over-

elaboration and ornament, the book nevertheless remains a masterpiece. In its highest expression, where paradox and point of view were not insisted on, where pure lyric narrative fills the page, I know of nothing more lovely. "Lovely" may be an exaggerated word, yet I think that it is almost the only word which can be applied in this connection. Let me give, as an example, a few lines from the marvellous and inspired pages which treat of the Divine Comedy of Dante. Would that I could quote the whole of the supreme and splendid passages! That is impossible. But listen at least to these few lines.

The poet is describing his spiritual experiences while reading the mighty harmonies of the Florentine :

"On and on we go climbing the marvellous stair, and the stars become larger than their wont, and the song of the kings grows faint, and at length we reach the seven trees of gold and the garden of the Earthly Paradise. In a griffin-drawn chariot appears one whose brows are bound with olive, who is veiled in white, and mantled in green, and robed in a vesture that is coloured like live fire. The ancient flame wakes within us. Our blood quickens through terrible pulses. We recognise her. It is Beatrice, the woman we have worshipped. The ice congealed about our heart melts. Wild tears of anguish break from us, and we bow our

forehead to the ground, for we know that we have sinned. When we have done penance, and are purified, and have drunk of the fountain of Lethe and bathed in the fountain of Eunoe, the mistress of our soul raises us to the Paradise of Heaven. Out of that eternal pearl, the moon, the face of Piccarda Donati leans to us. Her beauty troubles us for a moment, and when, like a thing that falls through water, she passes away, we gaze after her with wistful eyes."

Do not these words strike almost the highest, purest, and most beautiful note that any writer of prose has struck throughout the centuries. In English, at least, I know of nothing more rapt and ecstatic. It is above criticism and the man who wrote it must for ever wear in our minds one of the supreme laurels that artistic achievement can bestow.

One more paragraph will show the author of "Intentions" in a different mood, but yet one in which the supreme sense of beauty and of form throbs out upon the page and fills our pulses with that divine and awestruck excitement that great art can give.

". . . wake from his forgotten tomb the sweet Syrian, Meleager, and bid the lover of Heliodore make you music, for he too has flowers in his song, red pomegranate-blossoms, and irises that smell of myrrh, ringed daffodils and dark blue hyacinths, and marjoram and crinkled ox-eyes.

Dear to him was the perfume of the beanfield at evening, and dear to him the odorous eared-spikenard that grew on the Syrian hills, and the fresh green thyme, the winecup's charm. The feet of his love as she walked in the garden were like lilies set upon lilies. Softer than sleep-laden poppy petals were her lips, softer than violets and as scented. The flame-light crocus sprang from the grass to look at her. For her the slim narcissus stored the cool rain; and for her the anemones forgot the Sicilian winds that wooed them. And neither crocus, nor anemone, nor narcissus was as fair as she was."

If the song of Meleager was sweet and if the suns of summer greet the mountain grave of Helikê, and the shepherds still repeat their legends where breaks the blue Sicilian sea by which Theocritus tuned his lyre; if the voice of Dante yet rings and sounds in the world-weary ears of mortals of to-day; if "As You Like It" has still its appeal to our modern ears as from a woodland full of flutes, then, indeed, this prose of Oscar Wilde's, so beautiful and so august, will remain with us always as an imperishable treasure of literature and as a lyric in our hearts.

"Poems in Prose" that Oscar Wilde wrote were published first in *The Fortnightly Review*, during July, 1894, when Mr Frank Harris was the editor. We must remember the date because

it was only a few months before the absolute downfall of the author.

In criticising this work of Wilde's, we cannot help the reflection that it was written at a time when enormous, sudden, and overwhelming success had thrown him entirely from his mental balance, and had filled him with an even greater egoism than he ordinarily had, at the time these fables, or allegories, let us call them, were produced, Oscar Wilde was at the very height of his success, and of his almost insane irresponsibility also.

That they are beautiful it would be idle to deny. Still we have the sure and dexterous pen employed upon them. There is no faltering in phrase, no hesitation of artistry. It is said by many people who heard the poet recite these stories upon social occasions, tell them to please, amuse, or bewilder one of those gatherings in which he was the centre in a constellation, that, spoken, they were far more beautiful than when at length he wrote them down and published them in the review. I can well believe it. On the two occasions when I myself heard Oscar Wilde talking, I realised how unprecedented his talent for conversation was, and wished that I also could hear him at times when he attempted his highest flights. Yet, even as pieces of prose, the title the author chose for them is perfectly justified. They are indeed "poems" in prose

and triumphant examples of technical accomplishment and mastery.

Yet, the condemnation of their teaching can hardly be too severe. With every wish in the world to realise that a paradox is only a truth standing on its head to attract attention, with every desire to give the author his due, no honest man, no Christian, no Catholic, no Protestant, but must turn from these few paragraphs of allegory with sorrow and a sense of something very like shame.

And it is for this reason.

The poet has dared an attempt of invasion into places where neither he nor any artist has right. With an insane pride he dares to patronise, to limit and to explain the Almighty.

Nowhere in this Appreciation have I made a whole-hearted condemnation of anything Wilde has written. Even at times when I most disagreed with his attitude I have attempted, I hope with humility and sincerity, to present the other side of the shield. Here I do not see there is anything to be said in favour of at least two or three of the prose poems—those two or three which give colour to the whole.

There is one of them called "The Doer of Good." It begins in this wise :

"It was night time and He was alone,
And He saw afar off the walls of a round city and went
towards the city."

Our Lord is meant.

The allegory goes on to say that when Christ came near to the city He heard music and the sounds of happiness and joy. He knocked at the gate and "certain of the gatekeepers opened to Him."

Our Lord passes through the beautiful halls of a palace and sees upon a "couch of sea purple" a man bearing all the signs of an ancient Greek stupefied by pleasure and by wine. The Protagonist asks the man He sees—"Why do you live like this?"

Then Wilde's prose goes on to tell how the young man turns and recognises his interlocutor and answers that he was a leper once, that Christ had healed him. How else should he live?

Our Lord leaves the palace and walks through the city, and he sees another young man pursuing a harlot, while his eyes are bright with lust. He speaks to the young man and asks him the reason of his way of life, and the young man turns and tells the Saviour of Mankind that he was once blind and that He had given him sight, and, therefore, at what else could he look?

The allegory goes on, but it is not necessary to continue an account of it. All it is necessary and right to say is, that the allegory is blasphemous and horrible—horrible with the insane pride of one who has not realised his imminent fall, who has realised the horror of his mental

attitude no less than the life he was proved to have been leading at the time.

I have purposely refrained from quotation here. But let it again be said that the artistic presentment of these parables is without flaw.

I do not think it would be a kindness to the memory of Oscar Wilde, nor be doing a service to anyone at all, to continue this ethical criticism of the "Poems in Prose." Let me say only that Wilde, in another story, takes a sinner to the Judgment Seat and introduces God the Father into a dialogue in which the sinner silences the Almighty by his repartee. All these "Poems in Prose" are written beautifully, as I have said, but also with an extraordinarily adroit use of actual phrases from the New Testament. I will permit myself one quotation before I conclude, which is surely saddening in its significance in the view of after events.

And God said to the Man: "'Thy life hath been Evil, and the Beauty I have shown thou hast sought for, and the Good I have hidden thou did'st pass by.'"

It remains to say something about Wilde's final essay, entitled "The Soul of Man," which also appeared in *The Fortnightly Review*." Upon its appearance it was called "The Soul of Man under Socialism," but it has since been republished under the title of "The Soul of Man."

The Philosophy of Beauty 353

This essay, brilliant in conception, brilliant in execution, has none of the old lyric beauty of phrase. It can in no sense be considered a masterpiece of prose, but only a piece of fine and cultured writing. In its paradox obscures the underlying truth. The very first words strike the old weary note. "The chief advantage that would result from the establishment of Socialism is, undoubtedly, the fact that Socialism would relieve us from that sordid necessity of living for others, which, in the present condition of things, presses so hardly upon himself and everybody."

As far as the prose artist is concerned, the essay has little to recommend it. He was tired, tired out, and had no longer the wish or the stimulus to produce the marvellous and glowing prose to which we have been accustomed in these other statements of the writer's attitude towards art, towards morals and towards beauty. Yet, at the same time, the man's love of individualism drove him to write this essay, and at certain points it comes strangely into impact with Catholic truth.

The more Catholic the conception of religion and of art becomes, the more surely the socialistic idea obtains. Certainly our Lord taught that individual character can only be developed through community. The great socialistic organ of England attempted the value and weight of

Oscar Wilde's defence of Socialism in the following words :—

“ Christ taught that individual character could only be developed through community. Some say he opposed Socialism because, when two young capitalists came to him wrangling about their private property, he ignored them, saying, ‘ Who made me a divider among you ? ’ I suppose these objectors still think that Socialism means dividing up. When his enemies were closing in upon him, and his life hung in the balance, a woman came and anointed his feet, and wiped them with her hair, and the good people were shocked, and complained of the waste. Might not the ointment have been sold, and the money doled out to the poor ? Christ defended her generous impulse, and remarked : ‘ The poor you have always with you. You have plenty of opportunities of helping them. Me you have not always. ’ This is erected into a great pronouncement that we must not attempt to abolish poverty ! To such amusing shifts are Christian Individualists driven !

“ But our contention is that although Christ was not a State Socialist, his spirit, embodied in the Christian Church, inevitably urges men to Socialism ; that the political development of the Catholic Faith is along the lines of Socialism ; and that, as the State captured the Church in the past, so now it is the business of the Church

to recapture the State, and through it to establish God's Kingdom on earth."

I quote them here in order to show what sympathy the essay awakened, even though that sympathy is utterly alien to the belief of the chronicler. And now let us finally bid farewell to Oscar Wilde as *Æsthete*, or, rather, as prophet and expounder of the *æsthetic*.

I have placed on record not only my own small opinion of his teachings, but a very solid and weighty consensus of condemnation of his attitude.

And I hope, from the purely literary point of view, I have made obeisance and given every credit to one of the greatest literary artists of our time.

PART VIII
“DE PROFUNDIS”

“DE PROFUNDIS”

“I HAVE entered on a performance which is without example, whose accomplishments will have no imitator. I mean to present my fellow-mortals with a man in all the integrity of nature ; and this man shall be myself.

“I know my heart, and have studied mankind ; I am not made like anyone I have been acquainted with, perhaps like no one in existence ; if not better, I at least claim originality, and whether Nature did wisely in breaking the mould with which she formed me, can only be determined after having read this work.

“Whenever the last trumpet shall sound, I will present myself before the sovereign Judge with this book in my hand, and loudly proclaim, Thus have I acted ; these were my thoughts ; such was I. With equal freedom and veracity have I related what was laudable or wicked, I have concealed no crimes, added no virtues ; and if I have sometimes introduced superfluous ornament, it was merely to occupy a void occasioned by defect of memory. I may have supposed that certain, which I only knew to be probable, but have never asserted as truth a conscious falsehood. Such as I was, I have declared myself ; sometimes vile and despicable,

at others, virtuous, generous, and sublime. Even as thou hast read my inmost soul, Power eternal ! assemble round thy throne an innumerable throng of my fellow-mortals, let them listen to my confessions, let them blush at my depravity, let them tremble at my sufferings ; let each in his turn expose with equal sincerity the failings, the wanderings of his heart, and, if he dare, aver, *I was better than that man.*"

These are the first words in that book which it was supposed would always stand as a type of real self-revelation and confession and which now is thought of by all the world as merely a brilliant piece of literature and an amazing tissue of misrepresentations.

Jean Jacques Rousseau never gave his real self to the world despite the loud Gallic boast of the paragraphs above.

Did De Quincey ? Did St Augustine ? Did anyone ever tell the truth about himself from the very beginnings of literature ? Newman's "Apologia"; Bunyan's "Grace Abounding"; the Journals of Wesley ; the Memoirs of Madame de Stael de Launay ; the diary of 'Madame D'Arblay ; the "Aus meinem Leben" of Goethe, the "Lavengro" of Borrow—how much in all these and in the hundred other works of like nature which crowd to the mind, how much is self-deception, how much picturesque fiction ?

Who can say ?

There is only one way of determining the value of an autobiographical statement—by a comparison of internal evidence with external historic fact. In the case of people whose generation has passed away this task is beset with difficulties, though not impossible. In the case of one who has but recently died, whose friends and contemporaries are living still, about whom documentary and oral evidence abounds, the task is more easy, though still a hard and, possibly, a thankless one.

In a consideration and criticism, however, of Oscar Wilde's greatest work, “De Profundis,” such an attempt must undoubtedly be made.

Yet, this question of sincerity or reality is not the only one to be determined, and it will be well, therefore, to treat of “De Profundis” with the assistance of a definite plan of criticism.

Let us then divide this part of the book into several sections.

There are, undoubtedly, a great many people who have heard the name of the book and read the extraordinarily copious reviews of it in the public press, but have no further acquaintance with it than just that. It will be necessary, therefore, in the first instance, to give an account of the actual subject-matter in order to make the following criticism intelligible and, it is to be hoped, to induce them to purchase and read this marvellous monograph, which is one

of the world's minor masterpieces, for themselves.

Secondly, a purely literary criticism will not be out of place, a criticism which treats of the book as a consummate work of art and a piece of prose almost unparalleled for its splendour and beauty in modern literature.

Thirdly, the vexed question of its conscious or unconscious sincerity must be dealt with, while the fourth consideration should surely be devoted to the philosophy and teaching, especially in its regard to the Christian Faith, which is definitely promulgated within the book.

Lastly, a few words about its actual legacy to the Europe of to-day should conclude this part of the Appreciation.

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“De Profundis” was published by Messrs Methuen & Company on 23rd February 1905. It was written by Oscar Wilde when in prison, by special permission of the Home Secretary. A fuller account of these details will be found in Part I. of this book.

Directly “De Profundis” made its appearance the whole press of England, almost without exception, devoted a large space to its consideration. The sensation the book occasioned was extraordinary and almost without parallel in modern times. An enormous controversy arose about it immediately. Every possible aspect of

the book was canvassed and discussed, and, strange as it may seem, a vast amount of venom and bitterness was mingled with the bulk of eulogy. The student of contemporary literature, or perhaps, in view of what I am going to say, it would be better to call it contemporary book publishing, can find no parallel to the interest and excitement this book occasioned, save only in the case of a very different production called “When it was Dark,” an over-rated sensational novel by a Mr “Guy Thorne,” whose views excited the various religious parties in the Church of England to a sort of frenzy for and against them.

In pure literature I know of nothing which, upon its appearance, made such an immediate stir as “De Profundis.”

With the various views of various sections of the community, I propose to deal later. With the doubts that were thrown on its authenticity as a genuine prison manuscript I have already dealt. I may here, however, quote a few words of a statement made by the editor of “De Profundis,” Mr Robert Ross, to a representative of an evening paper. They will explain for the reader all that he will further find necessary to introduce him to the circumstances under which “De Profundis” appeared.

“My object,” he said, “in publishing this book, as I have indicated in the preface and in

my letter to *The St James's Gazette*, was that Mr Oscar Wilde might come to be regarded as a factor in English literature along with his distinguished contemporaries. The success of 'De Profundis' and the reviews lead me to believe that my object has been achieved.

"I cannot expect the world to share my admiration of Mr Oscar Wilde as a man of letters, at present, although that admiration is already shared by many distinguished men of letters in England, by the whole of Germany, and by a considerable portion of the literary class in France.

"With regard to the authenticity of the manuscript, I may say that it was well known that during his incarceration at Reading Gaol he was granted the privileges of pen and paper, only permitted in exceptional cases, at the instance of influential people not his personal friends. The manuscript of 'De Profundis,' about which he wrote to me very often during the last months of his imprisonment, was handed to me on the day of his release. The letters he had written to me in reference to it are published in the German edition of the work, and later on, perhaps, they may appear in England, if I think it desirable to publish them here.

"Contrary to general belief the manuscript contains nothing of a scandalous nature, and if there was another object in publishing the work

it was to remove that false impression which had gained ground. The portions which I have omitted in the English publication, apart from the letters to which I have already referred as appearing in the German edition, are all of a private character. There are one or two unimportant passages which the English publisher—very wisely, I think—deemed unsuitable for immediate reproduction in England.

“In Germany Mr Oscar Wilde’s place in English literature had already been accepted. ‘Salomé,’ for instance, is now part of the repertoire, and Strauss, the great musician, is engaged on an opera based on Mr Wilde’s work, which he selected out of many others because of its popularity in Germany, and also, no doubt, on account of the dramatic intensity of Mr Wilde’s interpretation of the Biblical story.

“It is not for me to criticise or to appreciate ‘De Profundis’ on which many competent writers have given their opinions, but I should have imagined that it was sufficiently clear that Mr Oscar Wilde had not attempted to throw any blame for his misfortune on anyone but himself.

“The manuscript is written on blue prison foolscap. There are a few corrections. Although Mr Wilde gave me very full instructions with regard to those portions which he wished published he allowed me absolute discretion in the

matter, which he did about all his other manuscript and letters."

THE SUBJECT-MATTER OF "DE PROFUNDIS"

I have said that for those who have not read the book, a short synopsis of its contents is necessary here. But I am immediately confronted with a difficulty because, probably, no book is more difficult to sum up, to make a *précis* from, than this. However, I do all that is possible, and only ask my readers to remember that this bald catalogue will be elucidated further on in the article. In the preface to the book a letter of Oscar Wilde to the editor is quoted in which he says:

"I don't defend my conduct. I explain it. Also there is in my letter certain passages which deal with my mental development in prison, and the inevitable evolution of my character and intellectual attitude towards life that has taken place; and I want you and others who still stand by me and have affection for me to know exactly in what mood and manner I hope to face the world. Of course, from one point of view, I know that on the day of my release I shall be merely passing from one prison into another. . . . Prison life makes one see people and things as they really are. That is why it turns one to stone. . . . I have 'cleansed my

bosom of much perilous stuff.’ I need not remind you that mere expression is to an artist the supreme and only mode of life. . . . For nearly two years I have had within a growing burden of bitterness, of much of which I have now got rid.”

This, in some sort of way, will give the reader an idea of what the book consists or, at anyrate, of its other view about it.

He begins the work by a statement of the terrible suffering he is undergoing in prison. The iron discipline, the paralysing immobility of a life which is as monotonous and regular as the movement of a great machine, are set forth subjectively by a presentment of the effects they are having upon the prisoner’s brain. “It is always twilight in one’s cell, as it is always twilight in one’s heart.”

. . . He is transferred to a new prison. Three months elapse, and he is told of his mother’s death. He speaks of his deep love and veneration for her and says that he who was once a “lord of language” has now no words left in which to tell of the appalling shame which has seized upon his heart and mind. He realises the infamy with which he has covered that honoured name.

An anecdote comes into these sorrowful pages. It is an anecdote of his sad and guarded appearance among the world of men when he was

brought to appear before the Court of Bankruptcy. As he walked manacled in the corridor towards the Court Room, a friend of his, who was waiting, lifted his hat and bowed. Waited, "that, before the whole crowd, whom such an action so sweet and simple hushed into silence, he might raise his hat to me, as, handcuffed and with bowed head, I passed him by."

- A page or two is occupied with the poor convict's gratitude for this simple, sweet and dignified action. A marvellous eulogy is pronounced upon it.

What prison means to a man in the upper ranks of life is set forth in words of anguish, and then, following these paragraphs, is a frank admission that Wilde had ruined himself. "I am quite ready to say so. I am trying to say so, though they may not think it at the present moment. This pitiless indictment I bring without pity against myself."

He describes the great and brilliant position he had held in the world. He tells of all the splendid things with which fortune had endowed him. He admits that he allowed pleasure to dominate him and that his end came with irremediable disgrace.

He has lain in prison for nearly two years, and now he begins to describe his mental development during the long torture. Humility, he says, is what he has found, like a treasure in a

field. From this newly discovered treasure he builds up a method of conduct which he will pursue when he is released from durance. He knows, indeed, that kind friends will await him on the other side of the prison door. He will not have to beg his bread, but, nevertheless, humility shall bloom like a flower in his heart.

He begins to speak of religion, and avows his atheism. “The faith that others give to what is unseen, I give to what one can touch, and look at.” There is no help for him in religion.

He goes on to speak of reason. There is no help for him in reason. Reason tells him that the laws under which he was convicted were wrong and unjust laws, the system under which he suffered a wrong and unjust system.

Yet, in pursuance of his determination of Humility, he resolves to make all that has happened to him into a spiritualising medium. He is going to weave his pain and agony into the warp and woof of his life with the same readiness with which he wove the time of pleasure and success into the completion of his temperament.

Then there comes a long discussion of his own position at the moment, a common prisoner in a common gaol, and of what his position will be afterwards. He tells of occasions on which he was allowed to see his friends in prison, and afterwards describes a moment of his deepest

degradation, when he was jeered at in convict dress as he stood, one of a chained gang, on Clapham Junction platform. The story is utterly terrible. On the occasion of his removal from London to Reading, he says, "I had to stand on the centre platform of Clapham Junction in convict dress and handcuffed, for all the world to look at. . . . When people saw me they laughed. Each train as it came up swelled the audience. Nothing could exceed their amusement. That was, of course, before they knew who I was. As soon as they had been informed they laughed still more. For half-an-hour I stood there, in the grey November rain, surrounded by a jeering mob."

We find now, in our short survey of the book, the widely discussed passages about the personality and message of Christ. These form the greater part of this strange and moving masterpiece. They will be treated of hereafter.

Finally, come anticipations of release and plans for the future, and "De Profundis" concludes with an especially poignant and almost painfully beautiful passage which anticipates the kindness of Nature to heal a bruised soul to which man has given no solace :

"But Nature, whose sweet rains fall on unjust and just alike, will have clefts in the rocks where I may hide, and secret valleys in whose silence I may weep undisturbed. She will hang

the night with stars so that I may walk abroad in the darkness without stumbling, and send the wind over my footprints so that none may track me to my hurt; she will cleanse me in great waters, and with bitter herbs make me whole.”

“DE PROFUNDIS” AS A PIECE OF PROSE

There is very little of the wise and sensuous geniality of Horace in Oscar Wilde’s outlook upon life. But some lines of the poet, never a great favourite with Wilde by the way, certainly have a direct application upon the style of the author of “De Profundis”—

“Saepe stilum vertas, iterum quæ digna legi sint
Scripturus; neque te ut miretur turba labores,
Contentus paucis lectoribus.”—S. I. 10, 72.

A piece of prose to Oscar Wilde was always, in a sense, like a definite musical composition in which words took the place of notes, and he carried out the poet’s injunction to polish and rewrite with meticulous care.

Wilde had, in a marvellously developed degree, the sense that a piece of prose was a built-up thing proceeding piece by piece, movement by movement, sentence by sentence, and word by word towards a definite and well-understood effect. “It was the architectural conception of work which foresees the end in the beginning and never loses sight of it, and in every part is

conscious of all the rest, till the last sentence does but, with undiminished vigour, unfold and justify the first."

These lines were written by Oscar Wilde's master in English prose, Walter Pater, and we shall see how entirely Wilde has adhered to such an artistic attitude. Like the Greeks, he believed in an elaborate criticism of language, and the metrical movements of prose were scientifically and artistically interesting to him, as any student of harmony takes pleasure in a contrapuntal exercise. The analogy is perfectly correct, and Wilde himself has drawn attention to it more than once in his prose writings. Counterpoint consisted, in the old days of music, when a system of sounds called points were used for notation, in two or more lines of these points; each line represented a melody which, when set against each other and sounded simultaneously, produced correct harmony.

Wilde's prose was moulded entirely upon an appreciation of these facts, and the ear must always be the critic of the excellence of his prose rather than the intelligence, in the first instance, as reached by the eye. If we read aloud passages of "De Profundis" the full splendour of them strikes us far more poignantly than in any other way. It is true that Wilde's prose makes an appeal *ad clerum*, and it is not necessary for the connoisseur, the initiate, to apply the test of the

spoken word. But those who are not actually conversant with the more technical niceties of style will do well to read Wilde's prose aloud. They will discover in it new and unsuspected beauties.

Wilde, at one period of his career, published a series of short paragraph stories which he called “Poems in Prose.” With him there were many points of contact between prose and poetry. The two things could overlap and intermingle, though in his hands neither lost its own individuality in the process. There has been too much said in the past about the old principle of sharp division between poetry and prose. This was a classical tradition and was one which well applied to the Greek and Latin languages. It was maintained, until a late era in our own English literature, by the Gibbons and Macaulays who moulded themselves upon Cicero and Livy. But during the last century the force of the old tradition weakened very much. A newer and more flexible style of writing became permissible. Coleridge, De Quincey, Swift, Lamb, to mention a few names at random, showed that, at anyrate, prose need no longer be written as a stately cataract of ordered words with due balance and antithesis, and with certain rigid movements which were thought indispensable to correct writing.

Dr Boswell said, apropos of style—“Some

think Swift's the best ; others prefer a fuller and grander way of writing." To whom Dr Johnson replied—"Sir, you must first define what you mean by style, before you can judge who has good taste in style and who has bad. The two classes of persons whom you have mentioned don't differ as to good and bad. They both agree that Swift has a good neat style, but one loves a neat style, another a style of more splendour. In the like manner one loves a plain coat, another loves a laced coat ; but neither will deny that each is good in its kind."

Although Johnson and his contemporaries certainly had a great sense of rhythm and harmony in prose they were the last defenders of the old axiom that poetry and prose were two entirely separate things. It was Walter Pater who, in our own times, finally demolished the old tradition, and opened the way for a writer, such as Oscar Wilde, to bring the new discovery to its fullest perfection. Walter Pater showed that it was not true that poetry differs only from prose by the presence of metrical restraint.

Wilde, understanding this, most thoroughly, resolved early in his literary career that his prose should be beautifully coloured, jewelled, ornate, and yet capable of every delicate nuance, every almost lyric echo that could be caught from the realms of poesy and welded into the many-coloured fabric.

In Wilde's “Intentions” we have an example of his most ornamented and decorated prose, so marvellously musical that it reminds us of a fugue played on a mighty organ with innumerable stops. Yet, at the same time, in this book of Essays, Oscar Wilde frequently laid himself open to the charge of precocity and over-elaboration. It is possible to obscure the grand and massive lines of a building by an over-elaboration of detail. Beautiful as decorated Gothic is, I have in mind the Cathedral of Cologne, there is a more massive grandeur in the early mediæval work than anything the later style can give.

“De Profundis” is purged of all the faults—one might almost say the faults of excellence—that the hypercritical student may sometimes find in the earlier prose of its author. Just as the man himself was purged and purified in mind by the terrible experiences of prison, so his style also became stronger and more beautiful, and what was once reminiscent of a marvellous nocturne or ballade of Chopin, or “some mad scarlet thing by Dvorak” inherent with all the beauty of just this, now acquires the harmony and strength of a great wind blowing through a forest.

The prose is still full of the old symbolism and imagery, but these two means of producing an effect are used with much more restraint of language and simplicity of words. Note, for

example, how the following paragraph, especially when read aloud, proceeds from symbol to symbol with a marvellously adroit use of the dactyl and the spondæ, or rather their equivalents in English prosody, until the final thought is enunciated, the voice drops, the sentence is complete. "When one has weighed the sun in the balance and measured the steps of the moon, and mapped out the seven Heavens, star by star, there still remains oneself."

Here we notice in addition, the extraordinary influence that the words of the Bible always had upon the prose of Oscar Wilde. In his lonely prison cell, where nearly the whole of his reading must have consisted of Holy Scripture, the influence was naturally greater than ever before. No one can read "De Profundis" with its rhythmic repetitions of phrase without realising this in an extraordinary degree. Take the passage I have just quoted and the following paragraph, which, let me assure my readers, I have taken quite at random, opening a Bible and turning over but a very few leaves of the Old Testament without any regular search,—
"So that they shall take no wood out of the field, neither cut down out of the forest; for they shall burn the weapons with fire: and they shall spoil those that spoiled them, and rob those that robbed them, saith the Lord God."

Yes! there can be no possible doubt that

much of the inspiration of “De Profundis”—that is, the purely literary inspiration—came from the solemn harmonies and balanced phrases of the old Hebrew singers and poets.

With Job, Oscar Wilde might well have said, and his own lamentations are strangely reminiscent of the phrase, “My harp is turned to mourning and my organ into the voice of them that weep.”

In “De Profundis” the special passages of rare and melodious beauty which star the printed page at no long intervals, have been very widely commented upon and quoted. By this time they are quite familiar to all who take an interest in modern literature, and this masterpiece of it in particular. Yet, in considering the prose of “De Profundis” we must not forget to pay a due meed of praise to the great substance of the book in which an extraordinary ease and dignity of style, an absolute simplicity of effect, which conceals the most elaborate art and the most profound knowledge of the science of words, links together those more memorable, because more striking, passages which leap out from the page and plant themselves in the mind of the appreciative reader like arrows.

“There is hardly a word in ‘De Profundis’ misplaced, misused, or used at all unless the fullest possible value is got from its presence in the sentence. Even now and then, when, in the

midst of the grave rhetoric of his psychology, the author descends into colloquialism, the ear is not offended in the least. He knows the precise moment when the little homely word will bring back to the reader the fact that he is reading a human document written by a human sufferer in a prison cell.

“If, after I am free, a friend of mine gave a feast, and did not invite me to it, I should not mind a bit, I can be perfectly happy by myself.”

Here in the midst of passages of calculated and cadenced beauty we have a little carefully devised sentence to which, though the ordinary reader will not realise the art and cunning of its employment, it will have precisely the effect upon the brain of the ordinary reader that Oscar Wilde designed when he wrote it.

The literary man himself, accustomed to deal with words, can, and will, appreciate the art of the artist in this regard.

It is with the profoundest appreciation and admiration for the marvellous skill of presentation, the perfect power and flexibility of the prose that I leave the consideration of the purely artistic merits of the book and turn to its real value as a human document.

As Oscar Wilde said of himself, he was indeed a “lord of language.”

“DE PROFUNDIS” AS A REVELATION OF SELF

We now come to a consideration of “De Profundis” as a revelation, or not, of the real sentiments and thoughts of the man who wrote it.

To the British temperament it is always far more important, in the judgment of a book, that the writer should be sincere in the writing than that what he wrote should be perfectly artistic.

The British public, indeed, the whole Anglo-Saxon world, has never been able to adapt itself to the French attitude that, provided a thing is a flawless work of art, the sincerity of the writer has nothing whatever to do with its worth. This attitude Wilde himself consistently preached in season and out of season. For example, he wrote a study of Wainwright, the poisoner, which, read from the ordinary English ethical point of view, would seem to show him a most sympathetic advocate of crime, provided only the criminal committed his crimes in an artistic manner and had also a sense of art in life.

When a friend reproached the monster Wainwright with the murder of an innocent girl, Helen Abercrombie, to whom he owed every duty of kindness and protection, he shrugged his shoulders and said—“Yes, it was a dreadful thing to do, but she had very thick ankles.” If we are to take Oscar Wilde’s essay, “Pen, Pencil and Poison,” quite seriously we must

believe him to be utterly indifferent to the monstrous moral character of the hero of his memoir. He speaks of him as being not merely a poet and a painter, an art critic and antiquarian, a writer of prose and a dilettante of things delightful, but also a forger of no mean nor ordinary capacities, and as a subtle and secret poisoner almost without rival in this or any age.

When "De Profundis" first made its appearance and the flood of criticism began, dozens of critics pounced upon the book, admitted its marvellous literary charm and achievement, and said that its author was absolutely and utterly insincere in all he wrote about himself. *The Times* for example, which still holds a certain pre-eminence of place, although it is the fashion of a younger generation to decry it and to pretend that it has lost all its influence, owing both to the change of public taste in journalistic requirements and certain business enterprises which have been associated with its name, spoke out to this effect with careful and calculated sincerity.

In an article which was extremely well written and had indubitably a certain psychological insight, the leading journal condemned "De Profundis" from an ethical point of view with no uncertain voice. It said that, while it was possessed by every wish to understand the author and to sympathise with him in the

hideous ruin of his brilliant career, it was impossible, except in a very few instances, to regard his posthumous book as anything but a mere literary feat.

The excellence of that was granted, but it was not allowed to be anything more than that.

It was not in this way, so said the writer in *The Times* that souls were laid bare, this was not sorrow, but the most dextrous counterfeit of sorrow. Wilde, so the review stated, was “probably unable to cry from the depths at all.” His book simply showed that there was an armour of egotism which no arrow of fate was able to pierce. Even in “De Profundis” the poseur supplemented the artist, and the truth was not in him. If the heart of a broken man showed at all in the book it must, said *The Times*, “be looked for between the lines. It was rarely in them,”

In short, so the review, when summed up and crystallised, implied, Wilde was incapable of telling the truth about himself, or about anything at all. Sometimes in his writings he fell upon the truth by accident, and then his works contained a modicum of truth. Consciously, he was never able to discover it, consciously, he was never able to enunciate it.

Now, that is a point of view which is natural enough, but which, after careful study, I cannot substantiate in any way. Over and over again

the same thing was said. Everybody was prepared, at last, to admit that Wilde was a great artist—in direct contradiction to that condemnation of even his literary power which was poured upon his works at the time of his downfall—but the general opinion of the leading critics seemed to point to the fact of “*De Profundis*” being a pose and insincere.

Now, if the book was merely an excursion in attitude, a considered work of art without any very profound relation to the truth of its personal psychology, then I think the book would be a less saddening thing than it undoubtedly is. Surely, the author had a perfect right, if he so wished, to produce a psychological romance. This I know is not a generally held opinion, but I do not see how anybody who knows anything about the brain of the artist and the ethics of creation can really deny it. If the work is absolutely sincere, as I believe it to be, then, from the moral point of view, it is indeed a terrible document. It shows us how little the extraordinary, complex temperament of Oscar Wilde was really chastened and purified. It provides us with a moral picture of monstrous egotism set in a frame of jewels.

As has been said so often before in this book, the worse and insane side of Oscar Wilde must always obscure and conquer the better and beautiful side of him.

Oscar Wilde describes himself as a “lord of language.” This is perfectly true. He goes on to say that he “stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of his time.” This is only half true. He continues that “I felt it myself and made others feel it.” The first half of this sentence is too true, the second half is untrue, inasmuch as it implies that he made everyone feel it, whereas he mistook the flattery and adulation of a tiny coterie for the applause and sanction of a nation. Oscar Wilde always lived within four very narrow walls. At one time they were the swaying misty walls conjured up by a few and not very important voices, at another they were the walls of concrete and corrugated iron, the whitewashed walls of his prison cell. He says that his relations to his time were more noble, more permanent, of more vital issue, of larger scope than Byron’s relation to his time. Then, almost in the same breath, he begins to tell us that there is only one thing for him now, “absolute humility.” That something hidden away in his nature like a treasure in a field is “humility.”

Comment is almost cruel here.

In another part of “De Profundis” the author airily and lightly touches upon those horrors which had ruined him and made him what he was, and which kept him where he was.

“People thought it dreadful of me to have

entertained at dinner the evil things of life, and to have found pleasure in their company. But then, from the point of view through which I, as an artist in life, approached them, they were delightfully suggestive and stimulating. The danger was half the excitement. . . .”

Is this Humility and is this Repentance? To me it seems as terrible a conviction of madness and inability to understand the depth to which he had sunk as one could find in the whole realm of literature.

“People thought it dreadful of me to have entertained,” etc. etc. Does not the very phrase suggest that Wilde still thinks in his new-found “humility” that it was not dreadful of him at all and that he had a perfect right to do so?

There is no doubt of his absolute sincerity. He is absolutely incapable of understanding. He still thinks, lying in torture, that he has done nothing wrong. He has made an error of judgment, he has misapprehended his attitude towards society. He has not sinned. Once only does he admit, in a single sentence, that any real culpability attached to him. “I grew careless of the lives of others.” This shows that a momentary glimpse of the truth had entered that unhappy brain, but it is carelessly uttered, and carelessly dismissed. All he cared for, if we believe this book to be sincere, as I think nobody who really understands the man and his mental

condition at the time that it was written, can fail to believe, is, that every fresh sensation at any cost to himself and others, was his only duty towards himself and his art.

Doubtless when he wrote “De Profundis” Oscar Wilde believed absolutely in his own attitude. He was no Lucifer in his own account, no fallen angel. He was only a spirit of light which had made a mistake and found itself in fetters. That is the tragedy of the book, that its author could never see himself as others saw him or realise that he had sinned. When Satan fell from Heaven, in Milton’s mighty work, he made no attempt to persuade himself that he had found something hidden away within him like a treasure in a field—“Humility.” There was in the imaginary portrait of the Author of Evil still an awful and impious defiance of the Forces that controlled all nature and him as a part of nature.

Oscar Wilde could look back upon all he did to himself and all the incalculable evil he wrought upon others and say quite calmly that he did not regret for a single moment having lived for pleasure. He tells us that he threw the “pearl of his soul into a cup of wine,” that he “went down the primrose path to the sound of flutes.” And then, after living on honeycomb he realises that to have continued living on honeycomb would have been wrong, because

it would have arrested the continuance of his development.

“ I had to pass on.”

Let us pass on also to a consideration of Wilde's teaching on Christianity in “ De Profundis.”

THE AUTHOR'S VIEW OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

It is necessary to deal with this part of “ De Profundis ” which treats of the unhappy author's “ discoveries ” in Christianity, because his views were put so perfectly, with such a wealth of phrase, with such apparent certainty of conviction, that they may well have an influence upon young and impressionable minds which will be, and possibly has been, dangerous and unsettling.

There is no doubt but that the teaching of “ De Profundis,” or rather the point of view enunciated in it, which deals with Christianity, shows that Oscar Wilde had failed to gain any real insight into the Faith. It is quite true that various of the sects within the English Church, especially those which dissent from the Establishment, might find themselves in accordance with much that Wilde said. A Catholic, however, cannot for a moment admit that the poet's teachings are anything but paradoxical, dangerous, and untrue.

A minister of the Protestant Church, Canon Beeching, preaching at Westminster Abbey on

“The Sinlessness of Christ,” referred to the portions of “De Profundis,” with which I am dealing now, in no uncertain way.

There are here and there things that a Catholic would not entirely endorse in Canon Beeching’s sermon, yet, on the whole, it is a very sane and fair presentation of what a Christian must think in reading “De Profundis.” It is as well to say frankly, that I write as a Catholic, and, in this section of my criticism, for those who are also of the Faith.

I print some extracts from Canon Beeching’s sermon :

“One wonders sometimes,” said he, “if Englishmen have given up reading their gospels. A book has lately appeared which presents a caricature of the portrait of Christ, and especially a travesty of His doctrine about sin, that is quite astonishing; and with one or two honourable exceptions the daily and weekly Press have praised the book enthusiastically, and especially the study it gives of the character of Christ; whereas, if that picture were true, the Pharisees were right when they said to Him that He cast out devils through Beezlebug, and the priests were right in sending Him to death as a perverter of the people. The writer of the book, who is dead, was a man of exceptional literary talent, who fell into disgrace; and whether it is pity for his sad fate or admiration of his

style in writing that has cast a spell upon the reviewers and blinded them to his meaning, I cannot say; but I do say they have not done their duty to English society by lauding the book as they have done, without giving parents and guardians some hint that it preaches a doctrine of sin, which, if taken into romantic and impressionable hearts, will send them quickly down the road of shame. The chief point on which the writer fixes is Christ's behaviour to the sinners; and his theory is that Christ consorted with them because He found them more interesting than the good people, who were stupid. 'The world,' he says, 'had always loved the saint as being the nearest possible approach to the perfection of God; Christ, through some divine instinct in Him, seems to have always loved the sinner as being the nearest possible approach to the perfection of man. To turn an interesting thief into a tedious honest man was not His aim. . . . But in a manner not yet understood of the world He regarded sin and suffering as being in themselves beautiful and holy things, and modes of perfection.' It seems to have struck the writer at this point that our Lord had Himself explained that He consorted with sinners, as a physician with the sick, to call them to repentance. For he goes on:—'Of course the sinner must repent; but why?—simply because otherwise he would be unable

to realise what he had done.’ In other words, a man is the better for any sort of emotional experience, when it is past, because he is fertilised by it as by a crop of wild oats; a form of philosophy which Tennyson in ‘In Memoriam’ well characterised as ‘Procuress to the Lords of Hell.’ But even this writer, absolutely shameless and unabashed as he is, does not hint that Christ Himself gained His moral beauty by sinning. The lowest depth of woe is theirs who call evil good and good evil, for that is a poisoning of the well of life. What is the use of calling Jesus “good” if we destroy the very meaning of goodness? May God have pardoned the sin of the man who put this stumbling-block in the way of the simple, and may He shield our boys and young men from that doctrine of devils that the way of perfection lies through sin.”

These words, although they are obviously said without any sympathy whatever for Oscar Wilde, have the germ of truth within them. Strong as they are, and no one who had really studied the whole work and life of Oscar Wilde would perhaps care to make so fierce a statement, they are, nevertheless, words of weight and value. I have no record among my documents of any Catholic priest who dealt with the Christian aspect of “De Profundis” upon its publication. Nevertheless, I have conversed with Christians of all denominations on the subject of Wilde’s “discovery”

of Christ, and I am certain that I am only representing the Christian point of view when I state that a wholesale condemnation of the doctrines Wilde enunciated is the only thing possible for us. Of the way in which his doctrines were enunciated no one with a literary sense and who takes a joy in fine, artistic achievement, can fail to give a tribute of whole-hearted praise and admiration.

Let us consider.

Morality, philosophy, religion, Wilde has already confessed have no controlling force or power for him. Yet, he takes up the position of those dim and early seekers after the Presence of Divinity. He would see "Jesus," Accordingly, Wilde writes of our Lord very beautifully indeed. He tells us that the basis of "His nature was an intense and flame-like imagination. . . . There is almost something incredible in the idea of the young Galilean Peasant imagining that he could bear on his own shoulders the burden of the entire world—all that has been done and suffered, and all that was to be done and suffered—and not merely imagining it, but achieving it."

As another Anglican minister, Canon Gorton, appointed out at the time, Wilde states that Christ ranks next to the poets. There is nothing in the highest drama which can approach the last act of Christ's Passion. Our Lord becomes,

in Wilde's eyes, the source of all art. He is a requisite for the beautiful. He is in “Romeo and Juliet,” in “The Winter's Tale” in Provencal poetry, and in “The Ancient Mariner.” “Hence Christ becomes the palpitating centre of romance, He has all the colour elements of life, mystery, strangeness, pathos, suggestion, ecstasy, love.”

And then Wilde finally says “that is why he is so fascinating to artists.” This summing up of the personality and mission of the Saviour of the world as a mere element in the life of mental or spiritual pleasure enjoyed by those who are cultivated to such a life at all, strikes the Christian man or woman with dismay. It is horrible, this patronising analysis of the Redeemer as another and great Dante, merely a supreme artist to whom artists should bow because of that, and no more.

Wilde, in fact, definitely states that the artistic life means for him the tasting in turn of good and evil, the entertainment of saints and devils, for the sake of extending the circle of his friends. He approaches the Personality of Christ *sub specie artis*, and only in this way, and his words are the more terrible to the devout Christian because they are so beautiful. Do we not remember, indeed, that once when a young man knelt to our Lord and called Him “good,” the Saviour put him aside? Does it not strike one that there is something very nearly blas-

phemous in the man who had lived the consciously antinomian life that Oscar Wilde lived daring to call the Saviour idyllic, poetic, dramatic, charming, fascinating? Does not the poet use the personality of our Lord as a mere peg on which to hang his own gorgeous and jewelled imagery, a reed through which he should make his own artistic music? Our Lord did not come into the world to win admiration but to win the soul from sin. His appeal was not to our imagination, but to our dormant souls to rouse and strengthen them.

Oscar Wilde writes of Jesus, but there is no Cross. There is a Saviour, but no repentance, no renewal, of life, no effort after Holiness.

It is terrible, indeed, to think of the poor unhappy author striving to appreciate Jesus, though surely even his blind semi-appreciation of the Personality of our Lord was better than none at all, and then to know that even the little germ of truth which seemed to have come into his life was forgotten and pushed away when once more the "appreciator" of Jesus of Nazareth returned to the world.

As an English minister pointed out, the moral of Wilde's attitude towards the Christian Faith is as old as Scripture itself, and as modern as Browning also, who, in the painter's question—"gave art, and what more wish you?" replied—

“To become now self-acquainters,
And paint man, man, whatever the issue,
Make new hopes shine through the flesh they fray,
New fears aggrandise the rags and tatters,
To bring the invisible full into play,
Let the visible go to the dogs—what matters?”

Finally we have to ask ourselves what is the precise value of this last legacy Oscar Wilde has left to us? I think it is just this. We have upon our shelves a piece of incomparable prose. I know of nothing written in recent years that comes anywhere near it as an almost flawless work of art. Nobody who cares for English literature or who understands in the least degree, what fine writing is and means, will ever neglect this minor classic. From another point of view also, it has its value. We who appreciate the immense genius of Oscar Wilde and mourn for a wrecked life and the extinction of a bright intellect, will care for and treasure this volume for its personal pathos, its high and serene beauty of expression, and also because, as a psychological document, it throws a greater light upon the extraordinary brain and personality of its author than anything he had written in the past.

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